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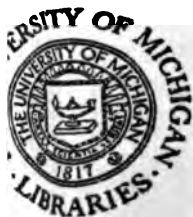


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'THE FROSTY CAUCASUS'

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THE FROSTY CAUCASUS'

AN ACCOUNT OF A WALK THROUGH PART OF THE RANGE AND
OF AN ASCENT OF ELBRUZ IN THE SUMMER OF 1874

BY
F. C. GROVE



HOUSE AT BEZINGI.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS ENGRAVED BY ED. WHYMPER,
FROM PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN DURING THE JOURNEY BY H. WALKER
AND A MAP OF THE COUNTRY TRAVERSED.

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'THE FROSTY CAUCASUS.'

CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY.

THE JOURNEY TO TIFLIS AND KUTAIS.

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ODESSA is famed beyond other cities for its dust. There is a legend that, in former days, strong winds would raise clouds of it so thick and widely spread that mariners expecting to make the port were able to see neither harbour nor buildings, and wondered greatly whether the land by the Black Sea had suddenly yawned and swallowed up for ever Odessa and its people. Paving the streets has partly diminished this

evil; but the dust-clouds still rise over the unpaved suburbs, and had gathered in choking and blinding force round the railway station on June 23rd, 1874, when the train from the frontier discharged us among a struggling crowd of Russian peasants on to the narrow platform. We were four in number—A. W. Moore, H. Walker, F. Gardiner, and the writer of these pages. Our course had been straight from London, and our object was to get with as little delay as possible to Kutais in Trans-Caucasia, whence we meant to strike into the heart of the great range of the Caucasus. One of our party, Moore, had been among these mountains before, having, in company with two other English travellers, Mr. D. W. Freshfield and Mr. C. C. Tucker, explored a large portion of the chain, but to the rest of us the Caucasus was new. We were all members of the Alpine Club, and as we had hopes of ascending a Caucasian peak, and of going over high Caucasian passes, we had brought with us a Swiss guide, Peter Knubel, of the well-known village of St. Nicholas, where every summer so many weary pilgrims halt on the road from Visp to Zermatt.

Only four days and nights had been required for the journey from London to Odessa. The best way had proved to be, not as might have been expected through Vienna, but through Berlin. Thence we had gone by Breslau to Mystlowitz, a poor little town close to the frontiers of Austria and Russia; from Mystlowitz, by a train so slow that ragged Polish boys

begging hard were able to keep up with it for awhile, to the sometime capital, Cracow.

A short stay here gave time for a glimpse of this famous and now very miserable city, where the Jews in their long black coats swarmed so that it seemed as if the place was populated by undertakers, only they were not undertakers but money-changers, though how so many of them could make a living where there seemed to be so little business doing was and is a mystery. I fear indeed that this, apparently the only industry of Cracow, is not flourishing, for when one of us changed a small sum a number of Jews came to watch the transaction, glaring with hungry looks, as poor children do through the windows of pastry-cooks-shops at the happy people who can afford to go in and buy. From Cracow the way had been past Lemberg to Pod-Wolcyska, on the Russian frontier, and thence through the remains of a great forest, and afterwards over a vast fertile plain, dotted in many places with windmills, to Odessa.

Some excited droschky-drivers seized us, after a violent struggle with their fellows, when, somewhat dazed by the dust, we got outside the station, and tore with us over the sandy roads into the clearer atmosphere of the city, where good quarters were found in a hotel placed among the range of large buildings which overlook the harbour. The remainder of that day and the next were passed in getting what information we could about the Caucasus, and in laying in a

small stock of things necessary for travel there. In both these quests we were much aided by Mr. Hunt, the English Vice-Consul, to whose kindness we were most deeply indebted. Without him indeed we should have fared ill; for, though there are many foreign traders at Odessa, the Russians predominate, and contrary to the belief usually held, Russians are wonderfully given to speaking their own language, of which difficult tongue we were all unfortunately ignorant.

The spoilt traveller of to-day is moved to some anger when he finds that a city exists principally for the people who live in it, and that there has not been sufficient consideration to provide picturesque streets or great sights for his amusement. Much could not be expected from Odessa, which is only some eighty years old; and it must be said that it is, from a wanderer's point of view, very uninteresting, though doubtless it is not found dull by those who carry on a flourishing trade there. According to accounts sometimes given, there is to be seen in this city, owing to its mixed population and commerce with the East, a medley of men of different race and garb as striking as that which was formerly beheld on the Piazza San Marco at Venice, but I cannot say that I found this verified. Civilisation seemed to have exercised its usual tiresome influence in causing all men to be clad alike in hideous clothes, the only exceptions being the peasants in their blouses and boots, and the droschky-drivers, who, for some reason, cling to a national cos-

tume, and are, like other cabmen, the enemies of mankind.

Most of the streets have a poor look, owing to their width being disproportionate to the height of the houses. There is nothing distinctive in the shops, which, save in very few instances, offer only ordinary European articles; and if the English traveller is for a moment gratified at finding that it is thought the highest recommendation to say of anything that it is of English make, he is, should he wish to buy, presently abashed when he discovers that the prices even of Bond-street or Piccadilly are hugely exceeded; nor is there much consolation in being told that things are still dearer in St. Petersburg. The discontented man need not, however, grumble at Odessa, as he will certainly have no difficulty in leaving it. There is the railway, and besides there are from the port two great lines of steamers—one to the west coast and Constantinople, the other to the Crimea and along the eastern shores of the Black Sea as far as Poti, whence runs a railway through Trans-Caucasia to Kutais and Tiflis. By a steamer belonging to the latter line we left Odessa on the afternoon of June 25th, with some prospect of finding the Euxine verify its right to the title of the 'Black,' otherwise the stormy sea.

Very shortly after we got outside the harbour was this found to be the case by the deck passengers—a varied crowd of Russian peasants, Georgians, Greeks, Jews, and Armenians, such as we had hoped to see,

but had not seen, in the streets of Odessa. Although a moderate amount of observation might have told them that there was a pretty sea up, they began, after the fashion of deck passengers whose devotion to cookery is usually incessant, to prepare their food directly they came on board, as though a double-reefed topsail breeze a point or two before the beam was just the thing to give an edge to the appetite and add zest to a meal. Of course they wasted their eatables, poor people, for the steamer pitched and rolled heavily, and the common curse was soon on European and Oriental alike. No better off were the first-class passengers, except that they were not so closely packed, and were able to hide their too audible misery in their berths. The evil did not last long, however, for in the evening the wind lightened, and the sea went down with wonderful quickness. People came out of their hiding-places, and gathered on the after-deck. Ladies were consoled with, and each man tried to look as though, whatever might have happened to others, he at least had not been sea-sick. The sea gradually became perfectly calm, and our craft, albeit not a fast one, made good way during the night. These steamers coast round the shores of the Crimea from Eupatoria to Kaffa, and the next day, after touching at the first-named place, we put into Sevastopol at about noon. The stay was not long enough to let travellers see anything of this town, so intensely interesting to Englishmen, nor, had it been

otherwise, should I venture on any account of what has been so often and so well described. One fact regarding Sevastopol should, however, be mentioned. It is sometimes said that the rebuilding of the place is going on rapidly. Rebuilding there certainly is, but the rapidity can hardly have been of the American order. Many ruins yet exist, and the great barrack in the centre is still a mere wreck, to all appearance untouched since the days of the war.

After Balaklava, which was passed at three o'clock, the character of the previously dull seaboard quickly changes, and during the rest of the afternoon the steamer's course was along the famous south-western coast of the Crimea, celebrated alike for its beauty and its gentle climate, and so fondly sought by great and wealthy Russians. Above are bold cliffs, below on the slopes which come down to the sea are rich woodlands, cultivated grounds, and many vineyards, the vegetation extending to the very water's edge—altogether a beautiful and fertile coast, much resembling some parts of that which rises over the Tyrrhenian Sea. There are numerous villas along this sunny shore, the most famous being Aloupka built by an Englishman for Prince Woronsow, Orianda belonging to the Grand Duke Constantine, and Livadia belonging to the Emperor. The last two are close to the watering-place of Yalta, where we anchored for a time in the evening.

After touching early the next morning at Kaffa,

the ancient Theodosia, the steamer coasted along the flat green shore to the straits and harbour of Kertch, the latter of which was reached a little after mid-day. Though of much commercial importance, Kertch seems a poor, wobegone little town, dirty and evil smelling. It was famed, however, even before the Crimean war had made its name familiar, for the ancient remains discovered in it and its immediate neighbourhood, and, according to local tradition, it contained the tomb of Mithridates. Historians, however, gainsaying popular tradition, as historians usually do, showed that Mithridates was buried somewhere else. Fortunately the steamer stopped long enough to enable us to visit the most famous of the remains which are around Kertch, the great tomb of some unknown king. The huge tumulus which contains it is some distance from the town. Into this tumulus leads a lofty corridor, the sides of fine masonry and the top vaulted by rows of stones projecting one beyond the other, their embedded ends being held down by the weight of the earth above; the corridor opens into a large circular chamber roofed in a similar manner, and with walls of the like fine stone-work. The sleep of the unknown king who was laid here was disturbed before modern explorers broke into his tomb, for they found it, I believe, empty.

The steamer sailed in the evening, and next day was passed in running along the wonderfully solitary coast of Circassia, whence most of the former inhabi-

tants have emigrated to Turkey, where they have, I fear, found little reason to rejoice in their change of country. The name Circassian is given in England very erroneously to all the inhabitants of the Caucasus, as great an error as it would be to speak of the people of Great Britain as Highlanders. Circassia is a region lying on the northern side, and in the western part of the chain of the Caucasus, and extending some distance along the shore of the Black Sea. The people of this district are rightly called after the country to which they belong; but the many other tribes who dwell in the valleys on either side of the range are different races, have distinctive names, and, though they may all be comprehended under the general title of Caucasians, cannot properly be spoken of as Circassians. It may surprise some English readers to learn that Schamyl was no more a Circassian than Rob Roy was a Welshman. Now that we were drawing near the mountain region, we began to find that there were certain obstacles to travel in it which would have to be overcome; obstacles very serious to us on account of the small time at our disposal. We had left London on June 19, and for two of us it was necessary to be back on August 19. From Captain Telfer, R.N., an English officer, who joined the steamer during the passage, we learnt that it would be almost hopeless to attempt to travel in the country we desired to see unless we got orders from the governors of the various provinces, or

a general order from the authorities at Tiflis requiring the chiefs of the villages to give us all aid in their power. If not thus provided, we should probably be stopped at a very early stage of our journey by some suspicious chief, who would conceive that he was doing his duty in barring the way to doubtful travellers. To get an order from each governor would be impossible, and it was therefore clearly necessary to go to Tiflis, though it was certainly doubtful whether the authorities there would give us what we wanted, seeing that we had no kind of claim upon them, and that they might very well refuse to grant official aid to unknown wanderers. Some uncertainty as to succeeding in our journey began, therefore, to arise now that we were close to the actual spurs of the Caucasus.

From Captain Telfer, whose acquaintance with Trans-Caucasia is very large, we received much valuable information about the country; and we were in like manner indebted to several of the passengers, now most of them Russian officers, who, I may add, looked on us with some surprise, although they were a great deal too courteous to bore strangers with questions. Among those who go by Poti to Kutais and Tiflis travellers for mere travel's sake are rare, and that such vagrants should be anxious to reach the secluded valleys which lie under the great peaks seems passing strange; so the Russians wondered at us, and indeed their wonder was quite natural.

In Western Europe the traveller lives in a world

which has come into existence to supply his wants, to amuse and defraud him; he is all-important to the section of the community among whom for the time he lives, and that people should travel for pleasure seems as much part of the natural order of things as that there should be commerce or agriculture. The ordinary wanderer in France, Switzerland, or Italy, would be as much astonished if asked why he travelled, as a peer would be if an usher in the House of Lords were to question him as to the advantage of an hereditary chamber; but when the region of couriers, *oberkellners*, guides, and *ciceroni*, is left behind, the appearance of an idle stranger journeying with no apparent object sometimes causes wonder, and there is a little curiosity to know what can have led him to roam so far. It is astonishing what difficulty he discovers in defining his reasons for travel.

We anchored early next morning off Soukhoun Kaleh, the principal Russian station on the eastern coast of the Black Sea, a cheery little town standing at the foot of wooded hills on the shore of a pleasant bay. The place being a foreign settlement, there is nothing specially characteristic in its houses, most of them being white buildings of recent date, some of them bungalows; but the Caucasian dress is seen in the streets, so that local colour is not wanting. Soukhoun Kaleh is on the seaboard of magnificent solitary Abkhasia, now in parts utterly deserted, there having been, since the serious revolt which occurred in August 1866,

a large emigration from this fertile and beautiful land. Of the journey which we contemplated making in the Caucasus, the last part was to be through Abkhasia, and the question of its population had a practical interest for us, as men cannot live on mountain beauty even though it be of the highest order, and where there are no inhabitants it may usually be taken for granted that there is no food. Our march was to end at Soukhoun Kaleh, whence we intended to return by sea to Odessa.

Towards the south, off Poti, the waters of the Black Sea shoal considerably, and passengers usually change at Soukhoun Kaleh from the steamer which has brought them thus far to a smaller one drawing much less water. On this occasion, however, the craft which should have been ready for us had, we were told, fixed herself securely and comfortably in the mud somewhere a long way off, and not even the captain of our vessel seemed to know how those bound for Poti and Tiflis were to be taken across the shallow waters. The day was therefore passed in wearisome uncertainty, during which our little world on board the steamer imitated the greater world very closely in persisting in giving shape to the unknown. Suspense is such a hard thing to bear that men prefer inventing stories and then believing them, to remaining altogether uncertain; and there were that day four circumstantial accounts—all of them erroneous—of what had happened to the missing steamer, and four definite and

precise statements, based on nothing whatever, that another vessel had been sent for the passengers and was within an hour of Soukhoun Kaleh. After a long hesitation, our captain at last determined to put to sea on the chance of a smaller steamer meeting him somewhere down the coast. If this did not happen, we had the agreeable prospect of coming back and spending a week or so on the Abkhasian shore.

To everybody's great delight, however, a little steamer, which was sighted next morning, made for us, and, with much gasping and roaring, managed to lay herself alongside. The passengers were at once sent on board her, to their great contentment. For us, indeed, there was double cause for exultation. A portion of the western range of the Caucasus is admirably seen from the part of the Black Sea we had now reached, and, as a most happy omen, the snow-peaks that morning were all clear, double-headed Elbruz, the highest of the range, being easily distinguished from his lesser brethren. To the south, over a great space of sea and land, were seen the mountains of Armenia.

There were some Georgian musicians on board the little steamer, who at first would play nothing but brassy French airs, which, with the vitality belonging to things bad and vulgar, had travelled thus far East. Persuaded, after some time, to quit this tawdry stuff, they sang a Georgian love-song to a strange wailing melody, exceedingly mournful and somewhat pretty. By the kindness of one of our

fellow-travellers, I got a translation of the principal verse of this ditty, a very old one I was told; I cannot say, however, that it has any character or colour. The lover tells his mistress that he desires nothing more beautiful and perfect than herself, that his heart has no misgiving about her, that his eyes are weak, dazzled by her beauty. A good many lovers all over the world have said much the same.

After the song the musicians played a Russian national dance, which brought about far more vivid and picturesque love-making than that of the feeble lay. There had come on board at Kertch a stately Mingrelian prince, singularly handsome, standing some six feet three, a very splendid-looking creature in the beautiful Caucasian dress. He had been filled with much admiration for a Russian lady, one of the passengers, and had devoted himself to her with great assiduity, without, I am bound to say, any response or encouragement whatever. Hearing the music now, he implored her to dance, which she absolutely refusing, he placed himself in front of her and there danced for some time with much energy and dignity, whereat I think she was a little moved, and indeed any woman must have been at such divine audacity. What poor, cramped, self-conscious man of the West would dare to show his devotion by dancing alone before his idol among a shipload of passengers; or, if he ventured to do so, would fail to make himself ridiculous? But the Mingrelian was not at all ridiculous, and, after dancing

very well, sat down amid some admiration. He took his seat, as it happened, next to me, and shortly made to me a long speech in Mingrelian, which, unless I much mistook the meaning of his frequent bows and smiles, was full of goodwill. I knew not a word of his language, but I was very unwilling to be behindhand in courtesy, so I followed the precedent of the Foreign Office, and replied to him at considerable length in English, wishing him all peace, health, happiness, and prosperity. I think he was gratified, for he told a Russian on board that he was pleased with me and conceived me to be of gentle blood, but that he had never heard such extraordinary sounds come from any lips before.

The time had slipped away pleasantly enough on board the little steamer, and we found ourselves, sooner than we expected, abreast of the mouth of the river and close to Poti, where the water was to be quitted for what could hardly be called dry land, since Poti stands in a charming morass. I need hardly tell the reader that the Rion is the stream down which came Jason and the Argonauts, and, considering how long it has been in use, this waterway is certainly in a shocking state. At the mouth of the river is a bar, varying in size according to the condition of the stream and the winds that have lately prevailed. At times there is on this bar less than three feet of water, and at such a happy period had we arrived. Great efforts have, I was told, been made by the Russians to improve, for purposes of navigation, the entrance to

the Rion, but hitherto without success, the bar forming again as fast as it was dredged away.

To land at Poti it is necessary to enter the river, and the steamer we were on board, small as it was, could not pass through the shallow waters. A flat-bottomed craft was to come out to receive the passengers, and we were told that she might come that afternoon, or that night, or next morning or evening; everyone grumbled, of course, but such delays, if not exactly liked at the time, are excellent lessons for men belonging to a country where people write to the newspapers to complain if an express is not absolutely punctual. We were not sorely visited, for the flat-bottomed steamer came alongside after we had been four or five hours at anchor, and, rather dangerously loaded, took us to Poti.

I can only repeat a comparison already made of this place to the Eden of 'Martin Chuzzlewit,' assuming that settlement to have prospered and grown larger. The marsh in which it is situated is on the left bank of the Rion by its mouth, and the level of the ground is below that of the river, which is strongly embanked. The one-storied houses are in most cases built on piles, and there are many of them, for Poti is a place of considerable importance. It is terribly unhealthy in the summer time, fever, as might be expected, being common.

At Poti we were to meet our interpreter or dragoon, a person of the highest importance to us, as

strange to say, there was only one man in the country who could fill this post for Western travellers, unless they possessed some knowledge of Russian. There were men to be found speaking several of the native dialects, and also speaking Russian, but what we required was a dragoman who, in addition to the native tongues, commanded either French, German, or Italian, and there was only one such in the land, a Mingrelian, Paul Bakoua Pipia, by name, who had formerly travelled with Mr. Palgrave, and had subsequently acted as dragoman to Mr. Freshfield and his companions, of whose journey through the country mention has already been made. Paul Bakoua Pipia, henceforth called in these pages Paul, speaks Georgian and its dialects, Russian, Turkish, and French. Georgian and its dialects suffice for the southern side; Turkish is usually understood on the northern, the chiefs sometimes speaking Russian. In describing the conversations held through Paul's aid with the natives, his interpretation, as recorded at the time, will be given, without in each case repeating the statement that interpretation was necessary, and as the constant reiteration of praise is wearisome, I will say here, once for all, that he is a man of incorruptible honesty, always painstaking, and devoted to the interest of those whom he serves. In addition to his knowledge of tongues, he possesses the rare qualification of being a good travelling cook, able to do well with very simple means. Since the journey with Mr. Freshfield he had been

lost sight of, and though Mr. Gardner, the Vice-Consul at Poti, discovered that he was somewhere in the neighbourhood of that place, we had been obliged to leave England without the certainty of getting this irreplaceable dragoman. On arriving at Poti, however, we found that, owing to the great kindness of Mr. Gardner, who had given himself much trouble in the matter, Paul had been found, and that he was willing to go to the wilds with us.

The Rion, a wide and powerful river, rushes down to the sea with so swift a current that the Argonauts must have found it easy work to pull down stream, though possibly the coxswain's work was trying. It seems hard that there should be a railway station on its banks; but that ugly sign of civilisation exists on its northern shore, to which travellers have or had to cross by boat or steamer, no bridge spanning the Rion at Poti when we were there, though there was one in course of construction. While waiting at this station, where the Orientals lost their apathy and dignity, struggling and shouting like a crowd of cockneys, it was pleasant to see that the Mingrelians and Georgians still held to the garb of their forefathers, and that rich and poor wore alike the noble Caucasian costume.

The great army of travellers for pleasure, commonly called tourists, has not yet sought the railway from Poti to Tiflis, but probably no very long period will pass before portions of the vast hordes which annually overrun great part of Europe and spread t-

Egypt and Palestine begin to seek the road through Trans-Caucasia. In the summer of 1874 the railway from Moscow had nearly reached Vladikafkaz, on the northern side of the Caucasus, and is now, I believe, open to that place. Many years will probably not go by before a line over the Dariel Pass unites Vladikafkaz with Tiflis, so that from the eastern shores of the Black Sea there will be communication through Trans-Caucasia and over the Caucasus with the Russian railways. A tourists' route between Constantinople and Moscow will probably then be established, and the journey is, for many reasons, likely to become a popular one; but at present travellers for mere amusement are few and far between; indeed their presence, as I have already said, excites some surprise, and they are treated with a courtesy which it is to be hoped they will not forfeit when they have become more common and are better known.

After leaving Poti the way was first over a morass by the side of the wonderfully rapid and powerful stream of the Rion, and then through that saddest scene, a dead forest. The marshy ground from which the trees spring drained formerly into the Rion, but now the railway embankment lying between the river and the woods has stopped the flow of the waters, so that they have gathered round the trees, which have thus, if the words may be allowed, been drowned, and very piteous they looked, still standing, but all dead.

After the forest had been passed, and we had got something further on our way, there came in sight some of the snow-peaks of the Caucasus, which are admirably seen from this part of the railway, and perhaps in future times the view will be hailed with acclamations such as are heard when Mont Blanc first looked on from the line to Geneva. The mountains, some of which are very beautiful, continued in sight until we drew near Kutais, whence later on we were to start for the high country, if it pleased the authorities at Tiflis to take us on our own valuation and treat us as respectable persons. At the station which is some distance from the town, we now left behind Peter Knubel and Paul, with instructions to the latter to obtain all the information he could, or, in other words, to pick up all possible gossip, of which we found on our return that he had got together a very respectable stock.

After leaving Kutais the journey was at first through a rich cultivated country, and then came a long and slow climb to reach the high saddle which marks the watershed between the Black Sea and the Caspian. The valley through which the railway runs deepens and narrows in parts to a gorge, and is not without beauty; but the view from the saddle when reached is uninteresting. Either the railway has been very lightly made, or else the inclines are exceptionally steep, for the upward course to the col and the downward course thence were wondrous slow. Almost

everything on the line was of English manufacture, and we were drawn by a marvellous Fairlie engine—a very double-headed nightingale among locomotives, for it consisted apparently of two ordinary engines joined together by their boiler ends.

Towards the evening we passed the curious old city of Gori, built on the side of a hillock, on the top of which is an ancient Georgian fort, consisting of a high skirting wall with towers at intervals, much resembling a feudal fortress, except that there is apparently no keep. Beyond Gori the hills are dotted for some distance with the entrances to the cave dwellings of some remote time, which seem scarcely to have received the attention they deserve in these days, when the traces of prehistoric man are studied so carefully and so minutely. The entrances to these caves, arch-shaped at the top, are obviously artificial, and I was informed by a Russian officer of Engineers, who was in the train, that the caverns were of great extent and very numerous, there being at one place a perfect village of them. They must have held in their day a large population ; but the engineer could not tell me whether any human remains or flint weapons had been found, the caves having, it would seem, been hitherto examined with little care. The Caucasus is frequently spoken of as the cradle of the European race, and as some of the Caucasians probably sprang from the inhabitants of these caves, it would surely be becoming in the zealous students of our time to pay some little

attention to the residences of their remote ancestors. There would be a family interest in the task.

After passing a famous old village bearing the easily pronounceable name of Mtskheti, and founded, according to Georgian tradition, by Noah's grandson, we arrived late at night at Tiflis, where the pleasure of ending a tedious journey was abated by having to say good-bye to some Russian officers whose acquaintance we had made on board the steamer, and who had come on from Poti by the same train we had taken. We had been much indebted to their kindness and courtesy for aid in the difficulties which beset travellers in a country the language of which is unknown to them. This was as pleasant as it was surprising to us, accustomed to the bustling selfishness of crowded Western travel; but we found afterwards that it was no exception; all the Russian officers we met showed the same genial desire to do the honours of their country well, and to be of use to those who were strangers in the land.

Among the high officials there was certainly every disposition to aid travellers. The Governor-General of the Caucasus is the Grand Duke Michael, who was away from Tiflis at the time we were there, affairs being administered in his absence by the head of his staff, Baron Nicolai. It was thought that Moore's name might be known to the authorities, as he had made a journey in the country before, and there being no time for a letter to be sent, he had telegraphed from

Poti to the Baron's secretary, General Pribil, asking if the Government would give us the order necessary to ensure good reception in the mountain villages. Without this, as I have already said, travel in the unfrequented districts would be impossible. On the day after our arrival at Tiflis, Moore was informed that the application had been laid before Baron Nicolai, and that the order would be immediately given. Nor did the prompt kindness of the authorities stop here. After having explained where our journey was to be, Moore was told that a letter would be written to the officer in command at Vladikafkaz, through whose district we should pass, bidding him give us any aid he could; also that a similar letter would be written to the General in command at Soukhoum Kaleh, in whose province the last part of our course would be. As will be subsequently seen, both these promises were faithfully kept.

It would be difficult to acknowledge too warmly such kindness and consideration on the part of those who, occupied with important affairs, could yet find time to attend to the requests of passing travellers. The facts I have given speak for themselves, and it is no trifling evidence of the good government of the Caucasus that the authorities are so willing to assist foreigners to travel in any or every part of it. We could hardly have complained if the order had been refused us, as we had no claim to any special privilege; but this most necessary warrant was granted without

difficulty or delay, and with ready goodwill further help was given. This business was transacted so quickly by the Russian officials that Moore was free before the morning was half spent, and the rest of the day was passed in wandering to and fro in the crowded streets. Tiflis, capital of Georgia and chief city of Trans-Caucasia, has now been in possession of the Russians for upwards of seventy years, and, as might be expected, has lost much of the colour and character of the East. It may seem flippant to speak with disrespect of so ancient and famous a place, but nevertheless it must be said of Tiflis, to use well-known words, that it is worth seeing, but not worth going to see, that is, not worth going so far to see. The new part of the city, built since the Russian occupation, is of course much like an ordinary European town; but old Tiflis, with its narrow streets and balconies, tells to some extent of Oriental life, and the long-ruined Georgian citadel gives a suggestion, if a faint one, of historic greatness. This sometime stronghold is on a height which dominates the town; towers, alternately round and square, connected together by a strong wall, surround the crest of the hill, turret and curtain being built of large flat bricks much resembling Roman bricks, and arrayed in courses alternately horizontal and vertical, which give a quaint look to the decayed old fastness. In fit keeping with the ruin was the huge carcass of an ox, which lay at the foot of one of the walls.

The shops or bazaar of an Eastern town are, it

must be confessed, nearly as interesting to some travellers as its ruins, and Tiflis has two products specially its own, being rich in coloured embroideries and silver-work. To the former much praise cannot be given, for, though they show some ingenuity in design, the fatal effect of European taste is but too evident in the hard garish colours which have supplanted the rich but subdued tones in which the uncorrupted Oriental delights; but the silver-work is of great beauty, as yet unmarred by foreign influence. It is for men that this handiwork exists. The Caucasian almost always wears a huge poniard, and he loves much, if he can afford it, to have for this a silver sheath and to hang it from a silver belt. At Tiflis sheaths and belts are principally made, great variety being shown in the designs of the latter, and both being ornamented with black inlaid work, which is sometimes of singular grace and delicacy. One street in the crowded bazaar which yet keeps its Eastern character is called Silver-street, and is tenanted by silversmiths whose craft, plied entirely for natives, still retains its old glory.

Full of many-coloured life it is, that bazaar, with its small open shops wherein the sellers loudly chant the value of their wares, and the varied throng of Georgians, Mingrelians, Caucasian dandies, wild herdsmen, Armenians, and Persians in its narrow ways. Many were the strange and picturesque types; but of all we admired most a gigantic Persian, whom we wondered at greatly, and decided at last to be an

armourer carrying his stock-in-trade on his person, for thus alone could be explained his marvellous accoutrements. He was of immense size and strength, and carried two guns, three pistols, three knives, and a sword; just the man, in fact, to vote for an unpopular candidate in Tipperary.

While wandering about the bazaar we met Lieutenant Kwitka, an officer in the Imperial Guard, whose acquaintance we had made on board the steamer, and to whom we had been indebted for much friendly aid in translating for us, as he spoke English exceedingly well. It was our desire during the journey which we contemplated in the mountain country to ascend or attempt the ascent of Elbruz, the highest peak of the chain, and we had told Lieutenant Kwitka that we should be much gratified if some Russian officer would join us in our attempt to gain this summit. He now introduced us to his friend Lieutenant Bernoff, who was anxious to grapple with the snows of the great mountain. Under any circumstances, the companionship of a Russian officer would have been a pleasure to us, but there were some special reasons for what we had said to Lieutenant Kwitka, which may be of interest to English readers.

In the year 1868 Mr. Freshfield, Mr. Moore, and Mr. Tucker, in the journey to which I shall several times have occasion to refer, made the first ascents of the famous Mount Kasbek, which rises over the Daniel Pass, and of the eastern peak of double-headed Elbruz.

That the travellers should succeed in those two expeditions was not wonderful, for they had all three been long accustomed to mountain work in Switzerland, and they had with them a skilful Chamouni guide ; but I regret to say that, without any reason whatever, some doubt was expressed at Tiflis as to whether these ascents had really been made. That this expression of doubt came from Russian officers, I do not for an instant believe. Jealous of their own honour, they would respect that of others, and probably the senseless suspicion was due to some small scribes such as are occasionally found in the capitals of outlying dependencies. It has now, I believe, disappeared, and I certainly shall not insult my countrymen by needlessly vindicating them from the puerile and contemptible aspersion. There can be no more doubt that they ascended the two summits named than that those summits exist ; and the more the mountains are explored the more strongly will the truth of the English travellers' statements be confirmed. Indeed, witness has already been borne to the accuracy of Mr. Freshfield's account of Kasbek by a Russian gentleman, who made the second ascent of that mountain.

We were exceedingly anxious to escape, in the event of our ascending Elbruz, any such unpleasant imputation as had been cast on those who had preceded us, and also to put the fact of their ascent of Elbruz beyond any possibility of doubt on the part of the Russians. We wished, therefore, much to induce

a Russian officer to accompany us, which, besides preventing any doubt being thrown on the expedition, would have the additional advantage of giving us a pleasant companion on the mountain. Lieutenant Bernoff hearing from Kwitka of our wish and the reason for it, immediately said that he should much like to scale the great peak; and shortly after we had made his acquaintance it was settled that we should meet at the village of Urusbieh, in the valley of the Baksan, whence the ascent of Elbruz was to be attempted. We told him that we should not leave the village before July 28, and he said that he would be there on the 26th. Lieutenant Kwitka was not sure whether it would be in his power to come also.

We found that evening that the order for the chiefs of the villages would not be ready until next day, as it had to be sent some distance for Baron Nicolai's signature. It was settled, therefore, that Moore should wait at Tiflis to receive it, and that Walker, Gardiner, and I should go to Kutais to make all ready for a start thence into the mountain country. At Kutais would begin the journey for which we had come out, and this would be, in great part, through a secluded and untravelled country, some of which we believed we should be the first Englishmen to see. With the mountain of Prometheus and his vulture, we should have, alas, nothing to do, for, though a very similar myth exists about Elbruz, the scene of Jove's vengeance was, according to local tradition, on Kasbek,

and our projected course would be far west of that peak. On the southern side of the chain our wanderings were to be in Mingrelia, possibly in Suenetia and in Abkhasia; on the northern side, from Balkar to that part of the Tcherkess territory, which is known as the Karatchai country. A sketch of the line we intended to take may here perhaps be given with advantage. It is divided into stages, but not according to each day's march, as to do this would make the account tediously minute. Our projected route, then, was as follows:—

1. From Kutais over the subsidiary range of the Nakerala mountains to Nikortzminda, and thence to Oni on the Rion.
2. From Oni to Gebi, higher up the river.
3. From Gebi to the source of the Rion, and thence over the main chain to the head of the Tcherek, on the northern side.
4. From the head of the valley down it to the village of Kunim and the gorge of the Tcherek.
5. From Kunim to the village of Bezingi.
6. Thence to explore the great mountain group at the head of the valley, and, if possible, to pass over the main chain to Suenetia, on the southern side, returning to Bezingi if this could not be done.
7. Bezingi to the village of Tchehem.
8. Tchehem to Urusbieh.
9. Thence to the summit of Elbruz (we hoped), and back therefrom.

10. From Urusbieh (round Elbruz) to Utchkulan, in the Karatchai country.

11. Thence over the Nakhar Pass, and down the valleys of the Klütch and the Kodor to the Russian post at Lata.

12. From Lata to another Russian post at Zebelda.

13. From Zebelda to Soukhoun Kaleh.

Much of the ground thus to be traversed was, to the best of our knowledge, new to Englishmen. The only English travellers who had before 1874 explored the high country between the Dariel Pass and Elbruz were, so far as I am aware, those already mentioned, namely, Mr. Freshfield, Mr. A. W. Moore (now of our number), and Mr. Tucker, who made in 1868 the long and difficult journey on each side of the range, which Mr. Freshfield has described in his graphic and interesting work, 'The Central Caucasus and Bashan.' An English sportsman was many years ago in the valley of the Kodor, passed thence to the northern side, and went a little way up Elbruz, but I have been unable to ascertain where he crossed the chain. Mr. Freshfield, during his journey, was at the villages of Gebi, Kunim, and Urusbieh, but he approached and left these places by routes different from those which we intended to follow, and, for the greater part of the way, our line of travel would be through country as yet untraversed by any Englishman, but very little explored by travellers of other countries, and in parts

rarely visited by the Russians. As to the people with whom we should have to do, they would be, on the southern side, the Mingrelians, possibly the Suenetians, and the men of Abkhasia, if any should be found in that much deserted land. On the northern side we should be among the dwellers by the Tcherek and the Baksan, and the inhabitants of the Karatchai country. These different tribes vary greatly in character. The Mingrelians, though honest men are to be found amongst them, are said to be usually lying and untrustworthy, besides being excessively indolent. They are not, however, a violent people, and I imagine that the traveller in their country is commonly in no danger from them. They certainly do not bear a good character; and Malte-Brun, quoted by Mr. Freshfield, goes so far as to say of them, that 'they live surrounded by women who lead a life of debauchery, often eat with their fingers, and bring up their children to lying, pillage, and maraudage,' which is very terrible; but I am afraid that the writer, if he had visited certain parts in our own country, might have said that the inhabitants habitually dropped the letter H, and sometimes kicked their wives to death. The Suenetians are a race of much darker type than the Mingrelians. Liars and pilferers all of them, they are also, when they dare, robbers and assassins. Their country, though perhaps rivalled by some parts of Abkhasia, is generally considered the most beautiful in the whole

range. Those who have visited it never fail to grow enthusiastic when they speak of its magnificent valleys, its noble forests, its almost tropical vegetation, and its vast, natural flower gardens sometimes covering whole hill-sides. But according to all accounts heard in the Caucasus, this earthly paradise is inhabited by the most barbarous of the Caucasian tribes. The Suenetician will lie, cheat, insult, plunder, and if he is in a bad humour, assassinate ; indeed, in some parts of their country, murder seems to be a habit rather than an excess. They kill each other freely, and though the traveller will usually be safe among them, owing to the dread of Russian punishment, their natural ferocity may now and then overpower this consideration, and Mr. Freshfield and his companions were in some danger from them in 1868. An event which happened in one of their valleys a short time before we were in the country shows the character of the Suenetician touch. A priest, having failed to cure a cow which had fallen ill, was beheaded by its owner amid the applause of a circle of sympathising friends.

A very different order of men are the Mohammedans, who dwell on the northern side of the chain, among whom we were likely to be for some time. As I shall afterwards have to speak at length of this people, I will now merely say that they bear in the Caucasus the repute of being a peaceful and fairly honest race, possessing sometimes considerable wealth in flocks and herds, though leading a most simple and

primitive life. With regard to the natives of the western province, the Abkhasians, they are for the most part, to use a hackneyed phrase, conspicuous by their absence. Since the revolt of August 1866 there has been a great emigration to Turkey from this region, and some parts of it covered by a dense forest seem to have been for a long space of time completely uninhabited.

Throughout the Western Caucasus the superiority of the Mohammedan tribes on the northern side of the range to the Christians on the southern slopes is strongly marked. The future historian of the country will no doubt trace and explain the reasons of this great difference. At present it must suffice to say that it exists.

The Caucasians of the north are as yet a fine example of a simple pastoral race, and still follow in their secluded valleys the patriarchal life of their forefathers. Although now a perfectly peaceful people, they still adhere to some of the habits of more warlike days, and in all else their ways are unchanged from those of the generations which have gone before. But it is to be feared that this cannot be for much longer. This little fragment of primitive life will soon be absorbed by the great civilised country on the borders of which it exists. Already the railway is drawing close—it has advanced one step since last summer—and with the railway will come the civilisation of our day, which will rapidly weaken and destroy that which

is characteristic in the life and ways of this ancient race of warlike shepherds. As few, very few travellers from the West have yet been among them, and as they may soon change or disappear, it is hoped that the attempt to give a sketch of their life and ways, of which part of this book consists, may not be without reason. It should be added that their region lies under the noblest peaks in the whole range of the Caucasus.

Whether the boundary of Europe is to be held to lie along the crest of that range, or whether it must be drawn further north, is a question of much geographical interest, on which opinions do not even now seem to be altogether unanimous, although almost all the weight of modern authority is on one side. In a letter written to the 'Times' after our return from the Caucasus, I spoke of Elbruz, which stands at the end of a spur on the northern side of the chain, as being undoubtedly in Europe. This was questioned by some Alpine critics whose letters showed so slight a knowledge of eastern geography as not to require any answer. Trivial, however, as the remarks made were, they nevertheless indicated that some difference of opinion still exists on the subject; and, in order to avoid apparent dogmatism, it may be well to state shortly the reasons for considering Elbruz to be in Europe, at the risk of giving what may be to many readers very trite geographical information.

Various boundary lines for eastern and south-

eastern Europe have been at different times proposed by geographers. To describe all the divisions suggested would require more space than it is advisable to give, but perhaps the proposal best known and commanding most attention was that which had, or rather was supposed to have, the authority of the Imperial Academy of St. Petersburg. That learned body, in what was, to use their own language, a 'prospectus' of a proposed description of the Russian Empire, suggested in 1778 as the boundary of Europe to the south-east a line drawn from the end of the Ural mountains along the Obtschei Sirt range, and from the end of this to the Sea of Azof. This line would cross the Volga and apparently the Don; but neither of these rivers is mentioned in the description of the proposed demarcation in the records of the Academy,¹ the passage being indeed so vague that it is by no means easy to understand from it, where, for the greater part of its course, the boundary was to lie. This was not astonishing in what was merely a 'prospectus,' not a complete work or treatise issued by the Imperial Academy; but, even if the full academical sanction had been given, it could hardly have established the proposed boundary against the just objection which has been taken to it of being in great part an alto-

¹ 'Acta Academiæ Scientiarum Imperialis Petropolitaniæ,' 1778. Prospectus d'une description générale, topographique et physique, de l'Empire de Russie projetée par l'Académie Impériale des Sciences de St. Pétersbourg.

gether arbitrary line not marked by any natural feature whatever, and moreover, of dividing great rivers so as to place the upper part of their course in one continent, the lower in another, a thing surely repugnant to all ideas of a continent. No continuous natural feature marking the limits of Europe to the south-east can be found north of the Caucasian range, and the watershed of this great chain of mountains has therefore been suggested as the only possible boundary-line of Europe and Asia between the Black Sea and the Caspian. This view was held by the late Mr. A. Keith Johnston, a high authority on such a subject, as need hardly be said, and may be considered to be that of modern geographers generally, save that some of them go still further, and place the boundary of Europe south of the Caucasian range.¹ It may perhaps be urged that theoretically a continent must be bounded by water; but to this argument there is the sufficing answer that such a boundary is in many places wanting between Europe and Asia, and that an arbitrary line marked by no natural features whatever are a purely artificial boundary, and assuredly worse therefore than a great mountain chain. Which seems the most fitting limit to Europe? the mighty wall of the Caucasus, or an artificial line drawn across country

¹ See the maps of Wieland and Kiepert, Weimar, 1866; Pfeiffer, Nuremberg; Brué, Paris, 1869; Chartier, Paris, 1869; A. Keith Johnston, London, edition, corrected to 1871; Magin and Pericot, Paris, 1874; Saganson, Paris, 1874; T. Schade, Glogau, 1874; B. Kozenn, Vienna, 1874.

precisely the same on either side of it? Surely it is a *reductio ad absurdum* to oppose to the acceptance of the Caucasian watershed as a border line an interpretation at once pedantic and doubtful of the word continent which would leave parts of Europe without any boundary at all. It may then be assumed that the limit of Europe cannot be placed north of the crest of the Caucasus, and in that case Elbruz, standing some distance north of the chain, is undoubtedly the highest mountain in Europe; for to admit that Elbruz and Mont Blanc are both in the Western continent, but to assert that the latter is the highest European mountain, is merely to talk nonsense rather than abandon a cherished error.¹

But I must now return to my fellow-travellers, whom I have had to quit for awhile. Having stopped a day at Tiflis, Walker, Gardiner, and I, travelled back on the next (July 3) to Kutais, Moore remaining behind to wait for the Russian order. The inhabitants of the capital of Mingrelia, for such Kutais is, showed, respecting the railway, an intelligence not unlike that of some of the rulers of our county towns, if the story told in the country is true. The easiest line to follow ran, it is said, a little distance south of Kutais, but the projectors of the railway were willing to carry

¹ If, however, it is thought essential that a continent should be bounded by water, perhaps the best limit to Europe would be the Terek and the Kutan. A line drawn from the source of one river to that of another would leave Elbruz in Europe, so that, even with this boundary, the supremacy of Mont Blanc would no longer be maintained.

it to the town, or to make a branch, if the people of the place would contribute a moderate sum. This, however, they absolutely refused to do, so the easiest line was followed, and now Kutais, we were told, was going to pay a much larger sum than that first asked to have a branch made. With railways, as with other things, history repeats itself.

With all the impartiality of discontented travellers, we condemned severely the narrow economy of the local authorities as we drove in heavy rain from the station to Kutais; but our attention was soon distracted from railway arrangements, for Paul, who met us, had collected for us in the little town a very respectable amount of gossip of immediate interest to ourselves. There were grave difficulties in the way of our journey, it seemed. The rain had been heavy, and the rivers were flooded; bridges had been carried away, and streams usually fordable could not be passed. A Russian who had started the morning before for Suenetia had come back, and wise men in Kutais said that the same thing would happen to us. But the floods were a small evil compared to another which threatened the unwary traveller. There was a brigand lurking by the road between Kutais and Oni; a brigand of unusual ferocity and determination. Said Paul, 'He is a Mingrelian prince who, having committed more than one murder, was seized by the Russians and condemned to be exiled to Siberia. A guard was taking him from Kutais to Tiflis, when, being

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a man of extraordinary strength and activity, he suddenly struck down the soldier on each side of him, and jumped out of the carriage. He was immediately lost sight of in the forest, and pursuit was unavailing. He allied himself with one or two other bandits, and is now robbing travellers on the road to Oni. We shall have a fight on the way for certain.'

We endeavoured to console Paul by some reflections on the exaggerated nature of local gossip and the excellence of English revolvers; the latter subject of discourse producing a much greater impression on him than the former. The sight of some ball cartridges added to his happiness, and he was in a fairly cheerful state of mind when we reached the dirty little inn which receives travellers at Kutais. We had told him to hire, while waiting for us, a couple of pack-horses. As a general rule, the traveller in the Caucasus does best to buy any horses he may want and to sell them at the end of his journey, as hiring them is not common, and is therefore disproportionately expensive and very troublesome. It was not advisable, however, for us to buy animals, as we intended crossing the main chain twice at least by passes which probably would not prove practicable for horses. Accordingly it was necessary to hire, and the day after our arrival at Kutais Paul brought to us a strange little hump-backed Mingrelian dwarf, who was willing to accompany us with his two horses to Oni. As became a dwarf, he had a good deal to say for himself. After an exordium in

which he stated that he was a man of no common merit, and always spoke the truth, he proceeded to give an account of the brigand prince, whom he made out rather blacker than Paul had painted him. Being interrupted after he had continued on this subject for some time, and asked what he demanded for the journey to Oni, he named an absurd sum.

Paul—That is too much by a great deal.

The Dwarf—Not in the least. Let the gentlemen understand I never speak anything but the truth. You see there is this brigand in the way. For any danger to myself I care nothing, being a man to whom fear is unknown, as many will testify. If the brigand should attack us, I shall probably make him prisoner. But remember my horses may be injured. If they are killed, I must replace them, and for the danger to them it is just I should be paid.

We were sceptical as to the existence of the brigand prince; but we found that the people of the inn believed in him, and the dwarf's terms were agreed to; whereupon, assuring us that such horses as his were rarely to be found, and such a man as himself never, he bowed himself out with much stateliness. He was the very ideal of an Eastern dwarf.

We were exceedingly glad to meet at Kutais Captain Telfer, who was preparing for a journey into Suenetia with the chief of the district recently appointed by the Russian Government. In this expedition Captain Telfer was, I believe, subsequently

perfectly successful, seeing much of this most interesting country. We hoped at the time to meet him in it, as we intended crossing into Suenetia from the northern side of the range.

I had an interview during the afternoon with Count Levachoff, the Governor of Mingrelia, who, with great kindness, gave me much information as to the districts best worth exploring, and ordered two letters to be drawn up for our benefit, addressed to two local chiefs of considerable importance. This was exceedingly courteous on his part, as he was overwhelmed with work at the time, being on the point of leaving Kutais, and I had hardly hoped that he would be able to attend to a passing stranger. Late in the afternoon Moore arrived, bringing with him the Russian letter duly signed, and imperative on all whom it might concern, and we passed the evening in destroying, to our own entire satisfaction, the brigand whom we clearly proved, according to the best principles of German criticism, to be a fictitious person, produced by the accretion of myths—a creature having but a subjective existence in the minds of the people of Kutais.

But we discovered next morning the mistake of applying the historic method meant to be used respecting things that happened long ago, concerning which hardly anything can ever be known for certain, to existing facts which may at any moment show themselves in ugly opposition to the best constructed hypothesis. The brigand prince was proved to be a

reality by being captured and brought into Kutais next morning. We heard the news from Captain Telfer, who had seen the soldiers bring in the bandit, who was badly wounded. There was a curious story about this brigand prince, showing a simple state of society. He and his father had each sworn to take the other's life. The father went on the logical ground that, being responsible for the existence of so mischievous a person, he was bound, as a gentleman, to rid the community of him. I do not know whether the son would justify his desire by equally sound reasoning.

Presently there came to the inn the Dwarf much excited. 'Have you heard the news?' he said to Paul.

Paul—What news?

The Dwarf—The robber is taken.

Paul—Is he? Who took him?

The Dwarf—I myself, none other. (The brigand had been captured by soldiers some way outside Kutais). Did I not tell you I was a man without fear?

Paul (coming to business)—I suppose, now that there is no danger, you will not want so much for your horses?

The Dwarf—On the contrary. The price I named yesterday was the proper price for the journey to Oni and nothing more, for I am ever just in my dealings, and would scorn to raise my price to strangers for robbers or aught else. But now, as there is no danger on the road, there are many people going to Oni, and, one of my horses being ill, I have to hire

another at great cost. Let the gentlemen understand that I am one who always speaks the truth.

He was got rid of with some trouble and other horses were found, but not until it was too late to start that day. All difficulties were now, however, happily over, and it was decided to march at daybreak next morning. Travelling accoutrements were put in order, which indeed was not difficult, as they were of the simplest kind, for Moore's experience had taught him that it was desirable to have as little baggage as possible; and we had therefore so reduced our luggage that it would almost have been carried free on a French railway. To avoid weight we brought no tent, but each man had a mackintosh bag lined with flannel for sleeping out. We had a cooking pot—an absolute necessity in the Caucasus—and a very small stock of provisions. We all four carried revolvers, as need hardly be said.

Moore fortunately had in his possession the sheets for the Western Caucasus of the Russian official map, made on the scale of five versts (about three miles and a third) to the inch, and commonly called the five-verst map. It gives fairly well the features of the green country, but is often inaccurate, sometimes altogether wrong, in its rendering of the high peaks, ridges, and glaciers, and of the heads of the valleys immediately under the great chain. This, however, is in no way the fault of the officers who were charged with the survey, as, at the time when it was made, to survey

the country at all was a work of great difficulty and danger.

I gladly take this opportunity of acknowledging my deep debt to Moore, who has kindly brought to my aid in the preparation of this book his extensive and minute knowledge of the intricate topography of the Western Caucasus.

CHAPTER II.

THE UPPER RION.

Start from Kutais—The Rion—The Tsiteli, or Red River—Gelati—Apparent tranquillity of the country—The Mamison route—Tkivbula and the well-meaning people there—Satchori Pass—Strange river—Nikortzminda—Ruined castle—The Valley of the Upper Rion—Sori and its priest—Utsora—Wilder country entered—Gebi; its position and inhabitants—Their wanderings in the Caucasus and aptitude at bargaining—Caucasian powers of speech—The Village Parliament—The Schoolmaster—Departure from Gebi—Wrong path taken early in the day—The valley of the Zopkhetiri—Eloquence of the Man of Gebi—Passage of a ridge—The Rhododendron Wood—Mishaps—Bivouac by the Rion.

THERE is a story, of course an Eastern one, of a prince who, having at the command of a magician or genie dipped his head into a bucket of water, lost all recollection of his former existence, and began a new life full of varied effort and struggle. He waged war, lost and won, loved and was beloved, until, after fifty years of changeful fortune, he suddenly found himself standing by the bucket of water with the enchanter by his side, and discovered that he had but dipped his head for a moment, and that what had seemed a life of adventure had been contained in an instant of time.

Now there is a grain of truth suggested in the wild extravagance of this fantastic fable. To most men, I

think, time seems to have passed according to the impressions received, to the number of images, so to speak, on the retina of the mind, rather than according to its actual duration; and a few days of unaccustomed travel appear, with their many vivid recollections, to separate one further from the days which have gone before than do weeks or months of habitual, monotonous life. Thus it certainly seemed to us when we found ourselves at last ready to start from Kutais with the all-important order in our hands, the brigand prince laid, the lying dwarf dismissed, and a couple of honest horsemen hired. The little incidents of travel had been so many and to a great extent so new, the change from Western life was so complete, that it was hard to believe that only seventeen days had passed since we left London. It seemed rather as though there had been a journey of two or three months or so, and, in like manner, the little difficulties which had beset us appeared in the light of great obstacles now at last overcome. Wofully disproportionate this was; but I do not think that we were singular in this respect, and perhaps much greater travellers would admit that they also have made the mistake of seeing everything that affected their journey through a mental magnifying glass of no inconsiderable power.

I trust that we had not indulged over-much in this feeling, and had not been unduly cast down when there seemed to be a chance of serious delay, but we certainly were very joyful when we found that there was

no longer impediment of any kind, and that we could make straight for the wilds. We held such moderate revel as the means of the hotel and a regard for walking condition allowed; said good-bye with great regret to Captain Telfer, who had to wait some two or three days for the chief of Suenetia, and went to bed hoping the best for the weather, for which we had to hope, as the Marchioness made believe, very much. We were to get off, if possible, at daylight.

There was a kind of snarley-yow, a dog-fiend, at the hotel, who lay asleep all day when his noise would not have mattered, and ran about the house barking hideously for the greater part of the night. The brute had not even the time-honoured excuse of baying the moon, for the sky was black as ink, and he can only have acted as he did from utter viciousness, in which, indeed he was a type of the Caucasian dog, the ugliest, the most savage, and at the same time the most cowardly of the dog tribe. This evil beast selected our door for special attention on this evening, attracted by one of Gardiner's boots which he thought he should like; but even his teeth were turned by the tough cowhide, so he barked and howled at our threshold for the entire night. It was then for once a pleasure to get up at daylight, an act which, except under some such special circumstances, I believe always has been and always will be detestable to man.

Very cold, poor daylight it was, albeit this was July 6, and there was an ominous look of rain to come

in the dull sky ; but, fair weather or foul, it was cheering to start, so the horses were laden with small delay, and at a little after six we were able to leave the inn, with all manner of good wishes from the frowsy host, whose very extortionate bill had not been disputed. I lingered behind for a moment, nominally to shake hands with a Georgian servant, but really to throw a stone at the dog-fiend, which, I am glad to say, hit him. I then followed the others through the muddy street.

After leaving the town, our way lay for awhile along the left bank of the Rion by a wide and goodly path. Very pretty was Kutais as seen on looking back from various places in the windings of the river. On the right bank, a height dominating the town is crowned by a ruined castle which, with the cheerful-looking houses round it, is pleasantly suggestive, as such ruins often are, of evil times gone by, and of present peace and prosperity. To the north of us lay the hill country through which the Rion twisted and turned after the manner of rivers. We were not to follow its windings for long, our road lying to the northeast, so, at no great distance from Kutais, turning sharply to the right and crossing the spur of a hill, we left the valley of the Rion, which we were not to see again until we had drawn much nearer to the source of that stately river. With the Red River, or Tsiteli, swollen and impassable according to the Kutais people, we now had to do, as, after crossing the spur, we de-

scended into the rich valley through which that stream flows down to the Kvirila, a powerful tributary of the Rion. Just opposite us, as we came into the valley, was Gelati, the great monastery of the Southern Caucasus. An edifice more admirably placed it would be hard to find. Unlike our own monastic buildings, which are commonly on low ground, Gelati, high up on a magnificently wooded slope, just under a bold crest, seems placed there to rule the beautiful valley below. The white walls and light-green roofs which mark the Greek Church stand out brightly from the dark mass behind, and, being under the ridge and not on it, the monastery has all the dignity which comes from a lofty site without the look of bleakness and exposure belonging to buildings which on a lofty ridge stand out against the sky line. The difficulties of transport must be considerable, but labour is cheap in the country, horses are many, and perhaps the monks of Gelati are not so hard to please as others have been. I believe that, in the Greek Church, a married priest whose wife dies must enter the monastic order. There must therefore be a large number of widowers in a Greek monastery, and men who have been married are notoriously less particular about meat and drink than confirmed bachelors.

The signs of security and moderate prosperity were to be plainly seen as we went on. The country was largely cultivated. The peasants whom we met were many of them unarmed, not even wearing the

great poniard universal in all the other mountain districts; and we did not see during the whole day a man carrying either gun or pistol. Wayfarers were many, and of pack-horses we saw not a few. The brigand prince must have been an exceptional infliction, for he who ran might read that the country was safe. As the morning advanced, it became more and more difficult to form any idea of the configuration of the district we were passing through, owing partly to the great intricacy of the tortuous valleys, and partly to the extreme badness of the weather. From the first the day was sullen, and as it wore on the heavy clouds grew darker, and the clammy mist stole further and further down the hill-sides, hiding ridges and summits, so that we were in much obscurity as to the course we were following, while we could learn little from the map, which is extremely vague in its rendering of this part of the Caucasus. For some time we kept to the Red River, which we crossed thrice—once by a bridge, and twice by fording. Leaving this stream, after passing it the third time, we traversed a low col, and descended into what was apparently a small lateral valley leading to a greater one, along the base of which we walked for awhile, and then struck up one side of it, making for the col at its head, as we afterwards found out; but the thick mist and the rain which had now for some time been falling, hid everything so completely that we might have been blind for any knowledge we could get of the

valley system through which we were passing, and of the scenery we could only judge by occasional glimpses through the mist. These revealed densely wooded hill-sides, which seemed to bear some resemblance to those in the more picturesque valleys of the Jura. We were on the route of the Mamison Pass from Kutais to Vladikafkaz, an important line of communication between the Northern and Southern Caucasus. Some trouble had obviously been taken with the road, which has been carried skilfully along the bases and slopes of the valleys, and is wide enough not only for horses but even for small carts. Its state, however, was something indescribable. It had never been metalled, and the soil is clay. Two months' continuous rain had produced a puddled mass, more holding than anything I have ever toiled through even in Sussex. Just at nightfall we were wallowing knee-deep in the miry way which led up the side of the valley, when a friendly native who was travelling by the same road overtook us, and told us that there was still a considerable ascent to the col we had to pass, and that from it to Nikortzminda, the village where we had hoped to pass the night, was six miles well told. He had, as it afterwards proved, an interest in saying this, but nevertheless spoke the truth. Shortly after he joined us we halted at a group of very wretched looking châteaux, one of which was what, for want of a better name, must be called an inn. We had passed two such during the day,

and, humble as they were, we afterwards found that they indicated an advance on any other of the mountain districts we passed through, for it was only on the Mamison route that the number of travellers seemed to be sufficient to call into existence any kind of resting-place for wayfarers.

Our halting place was called Tkvibula, and the inn or cantine which offered shelter, and the coarsest possible food and drink, was exactly like the others we saw—a rough shed with an earthen floor, no chimney, and only one window. The latter, which of course was unglazed, answered the purpose of a bar, for behind it was a closet in which were kept a small store of *vodka*, a barrel of acid wine, and a few loaves. Such was the entertainment for man. As for beasts, they were at liberty to browse about the place as they could, unless some kindly native could be induced to give them house-room with his own family, which, on this occasion, one hospitable Caucasian did.

It was rough lodging, but better, very much better than *la clef des champs*, which was the only alternative. Our friendly adviser as to the way turned out to be the landlord, who had not, as we afterwards found, at all gone beyond the truth in what he said of the distance to Nikortzmindia. Other natives who had been hanging about outside the shed with a cow-like indifference to rain, crowded into the place when they discovered we were going to stop. They were very dirty, and very willing to be useful. Everybody,

indeed, was most zealous in the service of the strangers, though obviously wondering greatly who the strangers were, and what their business might be. One boy waited on us the whole evening, considering himself quite repaid for his services by having the privilege of a closer stare than the rest. Others blew the wood fire with indiscriminate and blinding vigour. Our host, indeed, carried his zeal rather too far, for, having been asked by Moore to wash the boots, he did so, and then in addition filled them with water, and left them standing like so many black-jacks, under the impression that he had done his work with praiseworthy thoroughness. But, if there were some mistakes, there was goodwill all round, and even some of the roughest and dirtiest peasants who settled down to supper grinned at us from time to time, as though to intimate that we were strange people to look at, but nevertheless welcome. The rain grew, if possible, heavier after nightfall, but the roof was for the most part watertight, and nothing lulls so pleasantly to sleep those who have found cover from the storm as the sound of the pitiless downfall outside.

Paul, crooning over the fire like a witch, and looking ghastly enough for one in the flickering light, first met my eyes on waking in the morning. I was soon aware that the rain was falling as steadily as it had been the evening before, but somehow the sound did not seem so pleasant as it had done, and, as we shook off flea-troubled slumbers, and huddled round the

scanty fire, we felt much sympathy with the excellent Paul, who was keeping up a current of bilingual swearing, in which French and Mingrelian were to each other as complementary colours. It was all over the innocent work of tea-making; but to make tea over a half-lighted wood fire sending its pungent smoke into your face, whichever side you sit, is, as anyone who has tried it will bear witness, a labour full of vexation. It was finished at last, however, and the tea having been drunk before a rapt circle which had hastily assembled on hearing that the strangers were up, we started again over the holding clay, with the mist thicker than ever, and rain falling heavily enough to put out a volcano. To tell how we came to a stream which aroused that repugnance in the mild steeds bearing our burdens which, for some reason, horses always show to water; how knee-deep in mud we toiled up zig-zags; how, reaching the top of the pass, we saw nothing, were only to tell the story of a wet journey much alike in most mountain countries. We had, however, accomplished a stage, for we had reached the summit of the Satchori Pass, 3,972 feet high, a part of the Mamison route leading over the Sub-Caucasian range of the Nakerala mountains. The fog became less thick as the day went on; and after we had passed the col and begun to descend, we came to some of that woodland beauty which is the glory of the southern side of the great chain. A stream springing out a little below the top

of the pass, and widening with wonderful rapidity, wound through a stately forest. Some short way down a bridge crossed it, and from this point the rivulet, already become wide and even, flowed away in gentle curves through a vista of high trees which arched over it, as pleasant a sight in the greenwood as could be sought or desired. Very strange is the course of this mountain stream which, after showing great precocity in youth, and strengthening almost into a river while yet but a little distance from its source, seems to die early, like a too promising child. Near Nikortzinda, a few miles further on, it suddenly disappears into a hole in the earth, and is seen no more; at least so the natives say. The Russian map marks it as coming to light again some distance from the place where it plunges underground; but the map is not to be altogether relied on for this part of the Caucasus, and I am inclined to trust the native account. Sometimes the hole into which the stream plunges gets choked up, and then it floods the country, doing great harm. This abruptly terminated river is called the Sharaula.

Passing over some rather tame country after leaving the forest, we met three native women, who kept shyly off our path. They wore short skirts, with, I regret to say, trousers, and their faces were partly concealed by mufflers covering the mouth. What was visible, however, made one think that they were wise in thus partially veiling themselves. Shortly

after meeting these women, we came to the village of Nikortzminda, prettily placed on the hill-side, and dominated by a large, handsome church.

We entered here the considerable valley of the Khotevi, by which we were to descend to the Rion. Very wide, with gently sloping sides, studded everywhere with châteaux and small villages, it much resembles some of the richer and tamer parts of Switzerland, pleasing to the eyes of the peasant in exact proportion as they are dull to those of the traveller. Peaceful and prosperous the country clearly was, but the signs of different times in the past were not wanting. Some little distance below Nikortzminda a ruined castle stands close by the way, having been placed there, no doubt, with a strictly dishonest purpose, as the pass we were traversing is one which, in all probability, has been much used from a remote time. A great writer of our day has said that he could not live in a country where there were no castles; but then he, as a modern traveller, has been fortunate enough to see them only in their ruined state. No one has recorded that the wayfarers of other times, who passed the feudal fortress in fear and trembling, saw anything the least beautiful in it, and probably they would have been only too happy to live in a country without a castle on the face of it. I have never heard that Hindoo peasants are the least enamoured of the strength or beauty of the tiger.

It was a remarkable thing about this castle, and

also about several others which we saw in the Southern Caucasus, that they seemed to have been in ruins for a long period, as long to all appearance as those of Western Europe. Now, it might be thought that the time was not so very remote when Caucasian strongholds were likely to be of great practical use to their owners, and well worth keeping in repair; but they certainly look like very old ruins. We arrived at about three in the afternoon at the place where the valley of the Khotevi opened into that of the Rion, which stream we were now to follow to its source. Much swollen by the rains, it was roaring angrily down the magnificent valley, but fortunately the bridge was beyond the strength of its summer fury, and, crossing to the right bank of the river, we made what speed we could, hoping against hope that we should get that night to Oni, a large village, which we had expected to reach in two days from Kutais. It had seemed practicable enough to do so when we looked at the map before starting, but we had not enough borne in mind the smallness of its scale, and the consequent necessary imperfection of the drawing. The road was laid down for the whole way, but there was many a curve which could not possibly be indicated, so that what was a straight line on paper was found to be full of twists and bends, to say nothing of ups and downs. How much that added to the way need not be told; and very painfully clear it became to us that we were not likely to reach Oni that night, as we walked up

the valley, of which the great size was less pleasing than it should have been to men who declared themselves lovers of mountain scenery. The path was good, and from time to time led over stretches of soft turf, where oak and box-trees grew thickly. The slopes on either side were steep and lofty—bold and precipitous above, densely wooded below. It was a noble valley, perhaps a beautiful one, but we were agreed at the time that these great vales did not yield so pure a pleasure as those moulded on a smaller scale. Paul began early to hint that there was, nine miles short of Oni, a village called Sori, where quarters for the night could probably be found. At first he was scoffed at, but when, just before dark, we came in sight of this village, there was a unanimous opinion that it was not advisable to proceed further that night.

Just outside the place a group of villagers were in voluble discourse, but became mute and full of amazement when they saw us, wondering much who we were, as perhaps was natural. Singling out one of them who wore a flowing black robe and a kind of green turban, who, it seemed, was a priest, Paul informed him that we were most honourable and estimable persons travelling under the protection of the Russian Government, and asked him whether, considering this circumstance, he would give us lodging for the night. The priest, a business-like man, who came to the point at once, answered that he doubted not we were of high degree, and that he should be very happy to take

us into his house if we would pay him for it ; but that otherwise, being but a poor pastor, the honour of the thing alone would hardly be a sufficient recompense to him. Assurance satisfactory on this point being given, he led the way to his mansion, which was at some height on the slope outside and beyond the village. Most of the cottages in the place were poor one-storied shanties, but the priest's dwelling was of more consideration. It might even be called three stories high. There were a lower floor, used apparently for stores, perhaps at times for pigs ; a main story of two large rooms with a wide verandah behind, and an attic above. Into one of the large rooms we were shown. It possessed two divans and a small table—a great deal of furniture for the Caucasus—and would have been a comfortable place enough had there not already been in possession many herds of eager fleas, who, like creatures of a higher organisation, seemed very much pleased with a change of diet. Quietly and unofficially the priest did his best to get us what we wanted, aided by his son, a lad some sixteen years old ; but whether the female sex have less curiosity in the Caucasus than elsewhere, or whether they are kept in better order, certain it is that of the priest's wife and daughter we saw nothing, though Paul, who found out everything, assured us of their existence. It is to be hoped that there was a wife, for, besides the son, there was a baby, of whose life and vigour we soon became aware ; not that the poor little thing's howling mattered much, for the priest's dog—a

savage brute, who had tried to pin one of the horse-men—walked up and down the verandah, and barked without ceasing during the whole of that weary night.

Two hours' walk the next morning brought us in sight of Oni, which is a place of some importance in this part of the Caucasus, and may be said to mark the limits of civilisation. It is a large compact village, situated on the left bank of the Rion, a little below the junction of that river and the Sakaura; and though the houses are mostly one-storied *châlets*, there is an imposing stone building in the middle of the village, and here and there are what an Oni auctioneer would probably call first-class mansions. Around everything was trim, orderly, and well-kept; gardens, fields surrounded by strong fences, many vineyards; telling of good husbandry and a thriving people. Covering a great part of the wide base of the valley were some huge fields of barley, which, despite the bad weather, seemed fairly forward, considering that they were grown nearly three thousand feet above the sea.

At Kutais we had been contemptuously told that there were many Jews at Oni. This was spoken of as a great infliction on the village; but men of that energetic race are not much given to abiding where there is little to be made, and their presence at Oni is perhaps as good a sign as the community can desire. As to there being many of them in this part of the country, we had indeed abundant proof, although we did not enter Oni, which lay a little out of our way.

At Utsora, a little distance further on, where we halted for a while, the Jewish type was as common as in the Ghetto. One unmistakable old Israelite, wrinkled as only a Jew can be, showed all the readiness and ingenuity of his people, for he constituted himself our *laquais de place*, which certainly was a proof of wonderful quickness on his part, since foreigners at Utsora must be rarer than four-leaved shamrocks. This ingenious old man, who, if he lived in Paris instead of Utsora, would probably die worth half a million, took us to a cantine, assured the host on his own responsibility that we were most worthy men, and then bustled off to get us some water from a mineral spring which it is the pride of Utsora to possess, and a draught of which, it was apparently thought, could not fail in some way or other to do good to strangers. The master of the cantine was also a Jew, as were the greater part of a host of friends who gathered together to stare at the travellers, but it should be said, that here, as in other parts of the Caucasus, the resemblance between the Jewish and Caucasian types was great, and that to distinguish them was often by no means an easy task.

We were now entering on the really wild and untravelled land, as the district we were approaching is seldom visited by the Russians, and hardly ever by travellers from any other country. So far as Oni we had been amid comparative civilisation, and following a much-traversed track. There had been nothing, there-

fore, very strongly to impress the traveller from the West. The vile weather had prevented us from seeing much of the country, and the life of the peasants had not seemed materially different from what it is in the poorer parts of Switzerland and the Tyrol. Their dwellings are one-storied châlets with large verandahs in front, inferior to the Swiss châlets, but much resembling them. Barley and maize are largely cultivated, and the fields and the gardens of the cottages are sometimes surrounded by immense fences made of huge laths intertwined diagonally. These strong barriers are a necessary protection against the wild boars which abound in parts of the country. One isolated farmhouse which I saw was skirted by a massive palisade, some six or seven feet high, and the entrance was through a roofed gate so large and strong that it might have belonged to an English country-house. There was no sign, however, of defence being necessary against anything more formidable than the boars, for all we saw gave the idea of perfect security, and there was no reason to think that the brigand prince was at all a common character on the road. Mention has already been made of the cantines, in which the traveller can find cover and get some sort of very rough food. The last of them was at Utsora which might be considered to mark the limit of Russian civilisation. Henceforth our course was to be through the wild untravelled country.

From this village we continued our way up the

valley of the Rion. We were still on the track of the Mamison Pass; but after entering a magnificent forest some distance above Utsora we came to the place where the path to Gebi turns towards the NNW., that of the Mamison running towards the East, Gebi being our destination, we took the first-named track, and went on in rather straggling order through the wood. Loitering behind the others, I saw a man fishing in a small stream, and, peering through the thicket, I made out that he wore a dirty Russian uniform, but there was not time for much observation, for he was suddenly aware of me, and vanished like a roebuck. He may have done so from instinctive modesty; but neither that quality nor timidity are common amongst Russian soldiers, and I inclined to the opinion that he was a deserter, which seemed the more likely when I remember that there was no Russian post at hand from which a man was likely to come for a day's fishing. It would have been bad taste to have sought acquaintance with a stranger, perhaps armed, who obviously did not desire it, so I made no attempt to follow the Russian, but did my best to hope, as I went on, that he was not really a deserter, and was not condemned to a wretched life full of hardship and terror in those solitary woods. After passing through a noble gorge, the forest all around and above us, we came to an open alp, where some women were hard at work gathering store of firewood. Not so shy as those we had before met, they

spoke to us at once, but Paul was some distance off, and the curse of Babel was between those women and ourselves. Following the same course as before with the Mingrelian prince, I answered them in English, which I am afraid struck them as the most absurd series of sounds they had ever heard, for I have never seen women laugh more. One, the youngest and best looking, was obliged to sit down to have it out; but even she left off laughing at last, and, an exchange of ideas being unfortunately impossible, they returned to their firewood and we went on our way. We passed the village of Tchiora, which lay some distance from us on the northern side of the valley, had a desperate engagement with some sheep-dogs who showed a strong desire to pull Walker down, and finally sighted Gebi late in the afternoon. After crossing the Rion by a bridge so bad that the horses had to be left behind, we marched about half an hour before sunset into the village. It is so singular a place, and the good-tempered scamps who inhabit it play so marked a part in Caucasian life, that, before describing our reception, I must try to give some account of Gebi and of those who dwell there.

The village is beautifully placed on the left bank of the Rion, at a point where the valley bends round to the north. Apart from beauty, of which the founders probably thought as much as they did of animal magnetism, a better site could hardly be chosen. Below the valley opens out to a great width; above it

grows so narrow that Gebi commands it. To reach from the south the pass over the main chain at the head of the valley of the Rion, or to descend from it into the southern country, it would be necessary to go past the village, and this would also be a necessity for those traversing the Gebi-vtsek pass between Gebi and the valley of the Uruch. In former days then, when the Caucasus was less peaceable than it is now, the goodwill of the villagers must have been highly desirable for those who sought to journey by either of these ways ; and unless the ancestors of the present men of Gebi were singularly different from their descendants, payment must frequently have been the best, if not the only means of securing that goodwill. To what extent, in bygone times, men may have traversed snow passes it is impossible to say ; but to traverse a snow pass was, and is still, in much of the country, the only way of getting from one side of the chain to the other, and certain it is that the site of Gebi has been admirably chosen for commanding two important lines of communication between the Southern and Northern Caucasus.

Occasionally it might happen, of course, that there came a party of travellers sufficiently strong to despise the goodwill of the men of Gebi. In that case probably Gebi itself would have something to fear, and accordingly there rise among its hovels numerous strong towers which, though they would be useless as card houses against the lightest form of modern ar-

tillery, were perfectly suited for the mountain warfare of other days. What the village had to fear was not a foe who would bombard it from afar, but marauders who would plunder and burn the houses, and these towers, with openings for musketry under a series of small arches running round the top of each, gave posts of vantage from which a terrible fire might be maintained on those below; and, as the towers are distributed all over the village, the sacking it must have been a work such as murderous Suenetian or even stout Mussulman from the north can have been little likely to attempt or accomplish. Command of the two passes the men of Gebi still have; not because they hold the key to both, for the days when that would have enabled them to stop the way to others are long past; but by reason of their industry and enterprise. They are the pedlers of the North-western Caucasus, their practice being to cross the main chain and travel about the Mohammedan country during the summer months, doing such business as they can. In every village we visited on the northern side we found a man from Gebi come to sell light merchandise, or to buy the coarse home-spun stuffs of the place, and generally looked upon by the natives as an authority on matters of trade. Amusing fellows they were too, these pilgrims of business, having much of the vanity and mouthiness proper to the jack-pudding. They were ready to offer the most liberal terms for what they knew was not for sale, and it was pleasing to hear how

strongly they urged that we should be hospitably treated at the cost of others. If we had not seen them in their own home, we might have thought them a disinterested set of men, whose principal work it was to soften the manners and open the purses of those whom they found in their wanderings to be churlish or miserly. Unfortunately, before reaching the Northern Caucasus, we had, as schoolboys say, known them at home, that is, we had visited them in their own village, and found them as greedy a set of scamps as ever cheated travellers.

Not a very alluring place when entered was the home of these Caucasian hucksters, striking though its appearance was from the valley. The inhabitants do not, in all probability, return empty-handed from their long summer rambles; but all signs of their gains are carefully hidden. They live in poor, dirty hovels, and are themselves certainly dirty, and, to all appearance, poor; but there must be a considerable number of men amongst them who have put by what are for the country good, round sums of money.

We were not long in discovering that we were in a place where the strictest commercial principles prevailed. On our arrival we found the chief of the village taking a very leisurely lounge, one of the principal functions, as we afterwards discovered, of the head of a Caucasian village. To this great man we showed an order written in his own language, which Count Levachoff had kindly given us, enjoining the

chiefs of Oni and Gebi to yield us all assistance in their power. Something impressed by this, the chief immediately showed us into a large two-storied house, the only one of the kind in the place, and used as a school-house. It had a room apparently set apart for strangers of distinction, and in this the chief installed us; having done which he told us that he knew us to be persons of consideration, and begged us to accept the assurance of his entire goodwill and friendship, the offer of which in the Southern Caucasus, as elsewhere, means that nothing more is forthcoming. We did indeed, being very hungry, try to draw something tangible from these gentle words, asking him if he would help us to buy bread and meat; but he suddenly remembered a pressing engagement to meet a friend at the other end of the village, and was gone in the twinkling of an eye, leaving us with a number of grimy villagers who had followed him into the room. There was a moment's excitement after he had gone, for a hoary-headed old fellow, who had, it seemed, been one of Mr. Freshfield's porters, recognised Moore as having been at Gebi before, and welcomed him as warmly and as fondly as though he had been the lost darling of the hamlet; but, rejoicing in his discovery, the old man shortly went out to tell of this remarkable event to a quickly-gathered circle of intimate friends, and we were at liberty to concentrate our minds on bargaining with his fellow-villagers. Quite ready to bargain they were, long practice at that art having made them perfect.

Time mattered nothing to them, and they liked the work; moreover, they saw with instinctive quickness that we were famished, and that the longer they kept us waiting the more hungry we should be and the more inclined to come round to their prices; so they haggled and fought, and declared again and again that what they asked was just, was too little indeed, and that they were treating us as friends; in support of which assertions they appealed to those saintly personages who for some reason seem always to be regarded by rogues as their tutelary deities. The prices asked, and only abated after more than an hour of wearisome chaffer, were as follows:—a quart of milk, 2s. 2d.; a loaf of black bread, equal in quantity to perhaps a third of a quartern, 9d.; a pound of butter, 2s. 6d. As for meat, a lamb was offered for 1l. 2s. with a wisely vague proviso that we were not to object if it was small. When an agreement was come to, the adherence to the system of immediate payment was most rigid. Nothing was given up unless the money was handed over. Thus a man having come to terms as to the price of a dozen eggs, insisted on being paid for one which he had brought with him, and then appeared at intervals with the remaining eleven in three instalments, for each of which separate payment was required. It was weary work beating down their big demands, but it was necessary, as, if acceded to, they would be doubled or quadrupled the next day. Finding myself, however, of no use to either Moore or

Paul, who were fighting the battle, I went out to look about me before daylight was over, and came immediately upon the village parliament, an institution not indeed peculiar to Gebi, but full of life and strength there, and, like a greater parliament, affording much innocent pleasure to those who compose it.

During our whole journey through the Caucasus we were much struck by the extraordinary powers of talk shown by the natives. Seldom did their conversation flag. Carrying burdens up a steep incline under a burning sun, tramping along through mist and heavy rain, or pushing their way through the thick underwood of a forest, they rarely suspended their speech. Vicious comments are sometimes heard at home on the power women are said to possess of maintaining a prolonged conversation without too severe a strain on the mind, but the males of the Caucasus are, I venture to say, the equals of any women in the world for unceasing flow of words. If Mr. Carlyle had addressed himself to Caucasians, he would have required far more than thirty volumes to impress on them the divine nature of silence.

Now in the enjoyment of this beautiful gift of speech the men of Gebi seemed to us the most blessed of all those we met. The inhabitants of Utchkulan, whom we saw at the end of our journey, came near to, but scarcely equalled, these South Caucasians in their power of discourse. On looking back, I think we gave the palm to the latter; and it was in their

village parliament that the conversational vigour of the sons of Gebi best displayed itself. The place of meeting was a small grassy mound, close to the house where we lodged, and here of an afternoon it was the custom of the villagers to meet for some two or three hours of animated talk. On going out from the bargaining I found them at what was, I imagine, that day the most interesting period of the debate, for the assembly was engrossed in a conversational duel between an authoritative man—the Dr. Johnson, I should say, of Gebi—and a thin old fellow who had perhaps been advocating Whig opinions, and who, in public opinion apparently, was being crushed. The chief had got back from his engagement at the other end of the village, and acted seemingly as a kind of moderator, for, when the two citizens so far forgot the amenities of conversation as to spit at each other, he intervened with some remarks which, unless I am much mistaken, were like those of the conciliatory friend who tells the disputants that there is a great deal to be said on both sides, and that each has expressed himself admirably.

I attended the parliament again next day, when the harangues were so long, were marked by such action and emphasis, and were listened to with interest so intense, that I thought some important municipal question was being considered, but found, on inquiry through Paul, that the villagers were only having their ordinary chat, and that every afternoon saw them

thus employed. The rain, which was falling heavily on both days, disturbed them no more than it would a group of beavers. We were likely to have some experience of the conversational powers of the men of Gebi, for we had to find porters among them to cross the main chain with us by the pass leading from the head of the Rion to that of the Tcherek valley, and to go as far as Kunim or one of the adjacent villages, in all a three or four days' journey. It had at first been our intention to attempt, before starting for the pass, the ascent of Tau Burdisula, a fine peak about 14,000 feet high, rising to the north-east of the Gebi, and to do this we had meant to walk up the lateral valley leading to the foot of the peak the day after our arrival at the village, to sleep out that night, and to try the ascent next morning. But in mountain expeditions, more than in almost any others, men are subject to the condition 'wind and weather permitting,' and during our journey we had frequent opportunity of appreciating how much those words mean in a high country. The rain began to fall while Paul was yet chaffering with the natives on the evening of our arrival, grew thicker as night came down, and the last sounds we heard were of falling water. Next morning the weather was confirmed in evil. The ridges and hills around were covered with mist which came far down the slopes; it was raining heavily, and the barometer was falling. One might as well have put to sea in a jolly-boat as tried an unknown mountain under such conditions; and, our

time being limited, there was nothing for it but to abandon Tau Burdisula, and make ready for our journey to the northern side of the chain; so the chief was sent for, and was told to find men to go with us. He was bound to render us this service under the order we held from the Russian authorities, and he set to work at once, assuring us that he would get stout fellows who could carry burdens, and whose moral character stood high.

He was by no means a bad sort of man this chief, although he had not tried to make himself useful when we wanted food; but I think that, with regard to this matter, a horrible dread had haunted him that we might call upon him to supply us with what we required at fair market rates. The order we had received at Kutais might possibly be construed to give us some such power, and the idea quite unnerved the head of Gebi. When he found, however, that we made no such claim, he became full of goodwill towards us, really exerted himself to get us porters, and was anxious to be useful in any way he could without putting himself in danger of having to sell at a small profit. We had some talk with him during the afternoon, and he told us how he had been a soldier, and had fought in two campaigns against Schamyl; also how Gebi was governed by six elders, of whom he was the head. What authority this body as a whole may have exercised I cannot tell, but that of the chief appeared to me to be very slight; indeed, throughout

the Caucasus, the chiefs of the villages, though showing with some dignity before strangers, seemed to us to wield very small power.¹ I am sorry to say one of the party was so irreverent as to compare their office to that of the Lord Mayor. For one municipal institution about which we questioned the chief, the men of Gebi certainly deserve, if he spoke the truth, much praise. I have said that we were lodged in the schoolhouse; the schoolroom was next to ours, and here a meek Georgian teacher ruled over a class of little boys whom, without any very severe discipline, he seemed to keep in fairly good order. Our presence, however, was an unfair test, under which schoolboy and schoolmaster failed alike. As we went through the schoolroom on the morning after our arrival, we were conscious of the sudden hushing of some twenty shrill voices, and of twenty pairs of piercing black eyes steadily fixed on us. The teacher began from his desk what, unless I much mistook his tones, was an exhortation to the youngsters to mind their books, but it stopped abruptly when Moore drew out a gold repeater to show to an inquisitive native, and the schoolmaster, being frail, fell—that is, he came to look. I wonder if Dr. Hornby would go on with a dissertation on accent and quantity, if four Caucasian chiefs were to sweep through his class-room.

The youngsters were taught to read and write their

¹ The chiefs of villages are appointed for limited periods by the Russian Government.



own language, *i.e.*, Georgian. The house, according to the chief, had been built, and the school was maintained, entirely at the expense of the village, the Government contributing nothing. We applauded the inhabitants for this, but hoped they did not underfeed the meek schoolmaster—he looked woefully thin. It is the fashion at Gebi to eat only once a day, so that short-commons there must mean but one meal in forty-eight hours, the thought of which is horrible. I am afraid that we seemed to the villagers to go the other extreme, for they confided to Paul that they could not understand how men could eat three times a day. Nothing about us, they said, surprised them so much as these unheard-of appetites.

A few short gleams of sunlight, breaking at intervals through the heavy clouds of a hopeless day, enabled Walker to photograph a group of the inhabitants. For this we picked out the most characteristic-looking ragamuffins, who were not a little pleased at the honour done them, though something uncertain whether their after-lives might not be affected by what they submitted to; we did our best to set their minds at rest. They received, when we set them free, the wondering congratulations of their friends, as became men who had been singled out for honour, and who might have been running unknown risk. A crowd of villagers had watched the process, and indeed a crowd watched all that we did. Local curiosity was intense, and abated not during our stay. Throughout

the day the verandah outside our lodging was thronged, as our room would have been, had we not shut and barricaded the door, and used the window for going in and out. The sons of Gebi would not have hesitated to swarm in through the door, but drew the line at the window. Manners existed, if in an early stage of development.

The day went down in mist and rain, but things were a little better next morning (July 10), and at an early hour we began our struggles with one of the great difficulties of Caucasian travel—the dawdling habits of the natives. The chief had found us eight men, who assembled by degrees in front of the house, and conversed pleasantly for more than an hour, treating our repeated statements that the baggage was ready for them as irrelevant and in bad taste. Induced at last to come indoors, they took another hour in discussing how the packs should be carried, and it was only by energetic remonstrance with the chief that we got them at last under way. The males of the village, with unabated curiosity, assembled to see us off, two of the elders accompanying us for some distance. The porters at first seemed to go well, and, exultant at having started, we thought that the morning would see good progress made. Vain hope: after about an hour's walk from the village, our men told us that we must cross to the right bank of the Rion, which here flowed through many shallow channels. Higher up, the river is narrower, deeper, and impassable. Accordingly,

Moore and one of the elders got, both of them, on a horse which had been brought for the purpose, and went over as pioneers. They did not seem to meet with any great difficulty, but there was some little trouble in making the passage; and, when they had reached the other side, they were called back by the porters, who now determined to keep to the left bank. Crossing the river involved some effort at the moment. By continuing our way along the side on which we were we avoided this, but, as we afterwards found, much increased the length and labour of the journey to the foot of the pass; getting rid of the difficulty of the instant was, however, all the porters cared for, and they went the wrong way in perfect peace of mind.

Up the valley for a while, by the side of the roaring stream, then over a steep spur covered by a noble forest, and down into meadow-land, where the magnificent vegetation rose above our heads, we followed our foolish leaders, greatly admiring what we saw, and trusting that we were on the right path, till, when midday was long past, we had to awaken to the hard reality that the beautiful valley we were in was the wrong one, and that we should probably have to camp some distance from the foot of the pass. Moore, partly from what he found in the rather vague map, partly from an almost instinctive power of understanding mountain country, which many years' travel in the Alps has given him, discovered that, after crossing the spur, the porters, instead of taking us back to the

valley of the Rion, had led us into that of its tributary, the Zopkhetiri, and that a high ridge lay between us and the source of the first-named stream, which we hoped to reach that night. The reason for this course had clearly been our having kept to the Rion's left bank, along which the river could not be followed beyond a certain point, the shore rising in places abruptly from the stream. The chief of the Gebi porters, on being questioned about it, spoke as follows:—

The man of Gebi.—The gentlemen are quite right. This is the Zopkhetiri valley, but it is the best way.

Moore.—How then can you take us to-night to the foot of the pass as you promised? How can there be time when the day is so far spent? You would not cross the river at the proper place this morning; now you have brought us over a great spur, and will have to take us over a ridge, both of which the true path avoids.

The man of Gebi (becoming frantic with excitement when he discovered how well Moore had guessed the country.)—No, no, no! this is the right way. Do the gentlemen think I would deceive them? We will reach the foot of the pass to-night. I promise it! I swear it! If we do not, let the gentlemen bind me hand and foot, and take my head off, thus (drawing his finger round his throat). If we do not, may the twelve blessed Apostles band together to refuse me

entrance into heaven when I die, and cast me forth for all eternity. (Here a murmur came from the others to the effect that their chief had spoken well.)

Now the effect of this discussion and of the excitement it caused, was to get our men on a great deal further than they had intended to go. They had fully meant to have passed the night in the valley of the Zopkhetiri, but the temporal and spiritual penalties invoked by their head man being of a serious nature, they set to work in earnest to cross into the other valley before darkness came on. There was some work to be done and scant time to do it. First, the Zopkhetiri had to be forded. In ordinary seasons this would probably be easy enough; but the river was much swollen by the long and heavy rains, and the current was hard to stem. Each man had a struggle when he got to the middle of the stream, and felt the annoyance of being in considerable danger and of looking extremely ridiculous at the same time, which is irritating even in a secluded valley. Every one got across safely, however; but then came a second obstacle in the shape of a long, steep slope, about 2,000 feet in height, which had to be ascended. The shepherds had trodden a track through the dense herbage, but the broken stems which covered the way were slippery as if greased, and as we struggled on the ridge seemed, after the fashion of ridges, to recede steadily. While we were on the way up, we saw for a time the fine glacier in which the Zopkhetiri has its source. A well-

marked medial moraine divides this glacier into two branches, its lowest part being, according to such rough estimate as we were able to make, about 6,500 feet above the sea ; but the waning afternoon gave us scant time for observation, warning us to grapple with the slope. When at last we reached the crest, there was but small daylight left to descend to the base of the valley below, so we halted only a few minutes, and then plunged down through the rain which had been falling for some time, and grew much heavier as night approached.

Now that descent was something never to be forgotten. It is not often that the beauties of nature will cause forgetfulness of bodily discomfort. A man is full of appreciation in his easy-chair, with his pen in his hand, when he can in pleasant and leisurely fashion dilate on the rapture he felt ; but how often would severe truthfulness compel him who has wandered in the mountains to say that, cold, hungry and tired, he longed only to get to his journey's end, and cared nothing for the majesty of the great peaks, the grace of the winding river, or the infinite variety of the smiling valley. Most mountain travellers would, I think, confess that it has been so with them many a time ; yet there are, nevertheless, moments when the sense of beauty struggles successfully with physical fatigue, and, going down that hill-side, it was possible to forget weariness, cold, and hunger in the exceeding loveliness of all around. Our way lay through a wood of white rhodo-

dendrons in full flower, so thick and strong in bloom that they clothed the whole hill-side; while their radiant brightness was spangled everywhere with other flowers, many-coloured and brilliant, like gems on a king's mantle. There was no sign of man, or of any kind of life, in this wonderful garden of nature's tending, which was of such extent that we were near an hour in passing through it. The rhododendrons were those bearing the large blossom, not the dwarf variety so common in the Alps.

Going through a wood below the flowers, we reached the base of the valley in rather doleful plight. Moore, on the rhododendron slope, had given a severe twist to his shoulder, which reproduced for a moment an old dislocation and gave him great pain. Walker, deceived by a treacherous boulder, had taken a plunge in the clear mountain stream, a thing delightful at times, but annoying at that instant. The rest of us indeed were more or less wet through, and the rain was falling with almost tropical intensity; there was very little to eat; but those who travel in wild countries have to smile under much worse hardships than these, and we were kept from any tendency to grumble by the example of the natives, who seemed to be nearly as happy as when gathered together at their village parliament. Though very trying in some respects, they certainly were most good-tempered fellows, and possessed delightfully even spirits. Having picked up some dead wood in the forest, they made a fire with

wonderful quickness, drew round it, steaming like potatoes fresh from the pot, and plunged with unabated vigour into the delights of social talk. Imitating their cheerfulness as well as we could, we prophesied better things for the morrow, and got into the sleeping bags, both the bags and ourselves being so damp that I thought we should come out in the morning covered with a blue, furry mould. I am not sure but what one of us did.

For long, long after we had made ourselves as snug as we could, the Gebi men continued their talk. The fire threw its strong light on the wild figures, which stood out against the utter blackness of the forest behind, the whole making what is commonly called such a scene as Rembrandt would have loved to paint. I believe myself that Rembrandt would not have loved to do anything of the kind, but would have very much preferred stopping at home, for the heavy rain never ceased for an instant, its monotonous patter outlasting even the voices of the Gebi men, and continuing all through the hours of darkness.

CHAPTER III.

THE VALLEY OF THE UPPER TCHEREK.

The Source of the Rion—Crossing the Main Chain—Snow and Mist—Our Followers—Terror of Crevasses—The Two Men of Gebi and their Dead Ox—Passage of Glacier Passes by Cattle—Great Glaciers at the Head of the Tcherek Valley—The Guard of the Flocks and Herds—A Mohammedan Prejudice—The Hunter of Bouquetin and Chamois—Descent of the Valley—Grandeur of the Mountains surrounding it—The Glen of the Dych-Su—The Great Icefield—Ascent of the Slope on its Left Bank—Vast Glacier System—Bad Weather again—An Evening at a Chalet—Descent of the Valley to Kunim—Caucasian Dwellings—A Cold Reception—Its Cause—Further Descent of the Valley—Great Flight of Eagles—A Narrow Escape—The Gorge of the Tcherek—Return to Kunim—Caucasian Curiosity.

THE next day brought no change. The rain never ceased, the clouds never lifted, and all we could do was to move a short way up the valley to a place where, under the slight shelter afforded by some rocks, the Gebi men usually spend the night before crossing the pass. Our porters, who thoroughly understood camping out, cut down some small trees, and propped them against the rocks in such a way as to give very good cover; and there being nothing for it but to hope better things for the morrow, each man hoped to the best of his ability.

Well, sometimes—

‘Hope creates
From its own wreck the thing it contemplates.’

The rain ceased during the night, and next morning, though there were mists covering the ridges, the sky overhead was clear. There had been delay enough, even for the porters, so we started for the pass without any dawdling, the men of Gebi seeing that it was worth while to take advantage of what might be but a short span of fine weather.

On the eastern side of the valley, close to where we had camped, was the foot of a great glacier, source of the Western Rion. The eastern branch, which joins this some distance above Utsora, is a powerful stream; but the western arm must clearly be regarded as the true river. We were, I believe, the first travellers from the West who have seen the Rion issue from its parent ice, and we pleased ourselves by deciding that we had completed the work of exploration which Jason and the Argonauts began rather a long time ago.

The glacier does not fill up the head of the valley, which is a vast, sombre *cirque*, and this we entered, leaving on our right the foot of the glacier. The pass lies over its upper snows, but the ice-fall in which it ends, of which the mist allowed us to see only a part, is impracticable, and the course pursued is to ascend the slopes of the valley leading to the edge of the cliffs which overhang the right bank of the glacier, to walk

along these to the place where the glacier rises level with them, and then to strike the *névé*.

Immediately after entering the *cirque* therefore, we began ascending the slopes of its north-eastern side, and as we toiled up them were met more than half way by the mist, which was so dense that it prevented us from getting any idea of the country round as we rose. In addition the snow began to fall before long, and we had to make the rest of our way to the col in darkness and tribulation.

After a rather tiring walk up the steep slopes we reached the edge of the cliffs, which we followed to the place where the glacier rose level with them. We had struck snow while still in the *cirque*, but it was only what came from the heavy fall of the last two or three days. Along the edge of the cliffs it was very thick, and, strange as it may seem to Alpine readers, we were unable to tell precisely when we reached the *névé* of the glacier. A small, but unmistakeable crevasse, however, showed us that we were on ice shortly after the time when, as we guessed, we had left the cliffs, and after we had walked for some time over gently undulating snow slopes, a break in the mist revealed the col at no great distance, to the huge delight of our porters, who were getting a little puzzled, although they had shown remarkable local knowledge. A short walk up a gentle slope took us to the top of the pass. There we longed much, like the dying poet, for more light. The break had been but momentary,

and now the fog was, if anything, more dense than before, so that, standing in the watershed of Europe and Asia, we could see nothing but thickly falling snow. There was no use, however, in waiting for clear weather, which might not come for a week, so we got ready to descend at once. Our porters, who had not walked badly, uncovered, crossed themselves, and uttered a short thanksgiving for having got thus far safely; then as we began the descent a difficulty arose. The men had told us that on the northern side of the pass there were holes in the ice into which people sometimes fell and were killed—in other words, crevasses, and it was therefore advisable to put on the rope; but the porters, who had some idea of the use of it, now proposed to take it all for themselves, leaving us to follow in their footsteps. Our refusal to acquiesce in this modest and thoughtful suggestion produced a hubbub as of twenty fishwives, and we started down a slope of moderately steep *névé* with each man giving forth his ideas with all the power he possessed. We paid no attention to them, however, so they shortly left off disputing, and began all of them to use their voices in the much better work of saying their prayers, which they continued to do steadily while they remained with us; not that they remained very long. The fog lifted after we got a little distance from the col, and we were able to see our way down the glacier. It was obvious that the shortest journey would be made by keeping to the left and threading our way

through some crevasses of small intricacy offering hardly any difficulty. But near these crevasses none of the porters would go, save one old fellow who had some belief in us, but was frightened out of his wits nevertheless, and whose prayers, though he kept with us, became even more fast and fervent than before. The others, with profusion of angry speech, made off, yelling to their comrade: 'Idiot, since you wish to be killed with those madmen, go your ways.' However, the madmen and the idiot got to the lower part of the glacier a great while before the rest, who went a long way round by the right bank, and when our follower saw how much we had outstripped them, and that what he had thought dangerous had been safely passed, he left off saying his prayers and tried to look as if he had not been afraid, with no more success than usually attends that well-meant effort.

After an easy walk along the lower part of the glacier, we got into the grass slopes at the head of the valley of the Tcherek, and here we found two men of Gebi who were about to cross the pass from the north, philosophically reposing each of them with a bundle by his side as big as Christian's burden in the old pictures of the 'Pilgrim's Progress.' They had intended to drive across the pass a bullock, which I trust they had come by honestly; but the animal being much fatigued, and not likely to live over the snow, they had promptly killed him and cut him up, and were going to carry as much of him as they could

to Gebi; at least such was their story. They offered us a leg for a trifling sum, but not feeling quite sure that the beast had died by steel, we declined. It seemed strange to us that cattle should be driven over such a pass as that which we had just crossed, for, though not difficult from a mountaineer's point of view, it is far worse than any glacier passage which the Swiss would think of using for oxen or mules. Cattle, however, undoubtedly are driven over it, for we saw traces of them on the col itself, and here were our friends who had contemplated getting an ox over as quite an ordinary piece of work. Indeed, we had further proof of the pass being used for this purpose. In the Tcherek valley two guards are stationed during the summer for the purpose of preventing cattle-lifting by men from the southern side of the chain, and it was clear that the pass principally used by robbers for driving cattle over to the south was that which we traversed. On the southern side a route longer and easier than that we had taken is followed, but on the northern side the animals pass over the glacier by which we had descended; a strange place, certainly, for large four-footed beasts.

What the Caucasians do in this respect may, perhaps, explain the legends still heard in some parts of Switzerland of cattle having been driven over passes now thought difficult for men. In the old days, when roads and paths were few, cattle might be worth next to nothing on one side of a range, and selling for a fair

price on the other. Horses, mules, and oxen were then probably driven over places where no one would dream of taking them now. There was no other way of getting them to the district where they were wanted; if they died on the way the loss was small; if they got over safely the gain was considerable. When the cattle had been lifted there was, of course, all the more reason for running risk. With advancing civilisation cattle-lifting disappears, and better means of communication gradually equalise prices, and do away with the necessity of using these rough routes; but the legend of their having been used remains, and, like most legends, grows by degrees very much beyond the truth, until passes taxing the best energies of chamois-hunters are spoken of as having, in more adventurous times, been often crossed by skilful herdsmen with their cattle.

The head of the Tcherek valley, which is of wonderful wildness and grandeur, is filled by two huge glaciers. One of these we had just descended. Though not very long, it is of immense width, and appeared to us to be divided at the head into two bays by a ridge of rocks running down the centre. To the west of this is another mighty ice-stream, which seemed to be divided, like the first, by a ridge, and was apparently of equal extent, but we could see but little of the upper snows of either, the cruel mist lifting for so few moments, and then shrouding all so closely that we could get only a vague idea of the

great glacier system at the head of this magnificent valley. It is quite possible that what seemed to us to be two glaciers may flow from the same snowfield, and that the ridge which divides them does not reach the watershed of the chain; but with regard to this we were reduced to mere guesswork, the very short breaks in the mist not allowing us to catch more than a glimpse of the upper regions, or to set down anything with certainty. From what was seen, however, I can testify that the head of the Tcherek valley is of extraordinary nobility and grandeur; and I can conceive no place more interesting to the explorer of mountains, or indeed to any who care for the sternest beauty of snowfield and crag. The five-verst map so completely fails here to render the features of the chain, that I cannot but think that the portion of it representing the head of the valley must have been laid down from hearsay.

After halting for some time at the foot of the glacier, we went our way down the vale under heavy rain. At one place we had to clamber close to the stream round some rocks, which, though not difficult for men, were, it seemed to us, impossible for horses and oxen, and we vainly endeavoured to find out from the porters whether there was another track by which cattle were driven. Before coming to this passage we had seen on the western side of the valley, a short distance below the great icefields, the end of a large glacier, much resembling the Glacier des Bossons, as

it appears when the clouds are low on the flanks of Mont Blanc. After about three hours' walking we reached, towards evening, a wide, open space in the vale where the broken meadow-land of the grassy floor was pleasantly dotted with trees, while some rocks gave promise of shelter for the night. On the western slope a mighty glacier descended; to the east opened a noble, lateral valley, thick forest on its southern side; on its northern a great stretch of upland pasture, where herds of horses and oxen were grazing. It was a beautiful and striking pastoral scene, suggestive of a primitive life which was probably scarcely changed from what a traveller would have found it in the days of Marco Polo. That there was life besides that of the beasts of the field we shortly discovered, for we came to a chalet built of stone, but otherwise much resembling a Swiss chalet, and from this abode the shouts of the porters brought out its occupant, a magnificent Titan, who seemed beside the Gebi men as a bouquetin beside chamois. This splendid fellow was the guard of the head of the valley, being placed there to prevent cattle-lifting from the South.

His reception of us, without being surly, was not gracious, and on the porters he seemed to look with no friendly eye. He bade us enter and be seated, however, and no doubt would have become more pliable after a little talk, if talk had been possible, but, alas, there was room only for the most constrained speech, as he spoke a barbarous dialect of Turkish which

Paul could only in very small degree understand. One of the porters was able to translate it to some extent, but conversation filtered through a double interpretation was so tedious and uncertain that it could hardly lead to much increase of geniality. We were able, however, to make the unfailing appeal to man's best feeling by telling him that, if he would let us occupy his chalet for the night, we would pay him for it. He was softened by this, and seemed to become less suspicious. Three of our porters, who could not speak a syllable of his dialect, talked to him in their own for some time from pure love of art, as they knew perfectly well that he could not understand a word they said.

Being hungry we set to work to get some food ready, and in doing so managed to run our heads hard against a Mohammedan prejudice, the only prejudice, as we afterwards found, at all likely to give trouble to travelers in the Northern valleys. The true believer may not touch the flesh of an animal killed by unbelievers' hands, and ought not even to allow it to be brought into his house. All the food we had was part of a sheep which our porters had slaughtered for us, and when Paul proceeded to cook some of this the guard looked on with an expression such as a Presbyterian might wear when gazing at a Ritualist service. At last he interfered, as a pious man might to check an unseemly conversation, saying that really he could not stand it; that the frying-pan might be held over

the fire with the meat in it, but that not the smallest morsel must be allowed to fall into the flame, and that none of the flesh must touch the walls of the house. Even in this qualified toleration of the cooking I am afraid that he compromised a little with conscience, for he seemed to me uneasy in his mind.

Other guests besides ourselves arrived during the evening : two fine-looking fellows, who, we were told, were chamois-hunters, and a young shepherd. As happens often in a Swiss chalet, the conversation lasted till late, and when at length the men went to sleep there came a chorus from many noses which sounded all through the night, while at intervals was heard the melody of the inevitable Caucasian dog who barked and howled outside.

It was a real pleasure therefore when the pale daylight, stealing through the chinks of the rude hut, summoned the sleepers to awake and get them on their way. Moore and Gardiner, driven forth by the wood smoke, had slept under a rock, and on going out I found them already up, rejoicing in a fine morning, and gazing admiringly at the peak of Dych-Tau, which towered over the ridges to the north, a beautiful cone of marvellous steepness, and all dazzling with fresh snow. We departed with small delay. There was no time to light a fire for cooking mutton, and we had nothing else, so breakfast was dispensed with, a measure I cannot too highly recommend to those who wish to make an early start ; and as the porters were

also without food and in nowise sorry to be off, we waited only a few minutes to say farewell to the two hunters who came forth to wish us good-speed on our journey. Pleasant, genial fellows they were; and when in answer to a respectful request that they might see our firearms, a breech-loading revolver was shown to them, and then was loaded and fired, they were full of amazement and admiration, appealing vigorously to Sheitan, *i.e.*, Satan, who for some reason seems, in most parts of the world, to be invoked by men when they are very much surprised. Lingering for a minute or two behind the others, I asked the younger hunter through Paul what game he killed:—

The Hunter.—The two kinds of mountain goat.

Myself.—How two kinds?

The Hunter.—Why the big and the little (clearly the chamois and the bouquetin).

Myself.—How many do you kill in a year?

The Hunter.—About a hundred, (then, being obviously a truthful man), I did not kill as many as that last year, which was a bad one, but, taking one year with another, I kill a hundred. Down there by Dych-Tau is a wonderful place for game. Great big rocks difficult to go on—but a wonderful place, both for the big and the little.

Myself.—What is the best time of the year for hunting?

The Hunter.—Now: it is as good a time as any.

This last answer seemed strange. It was the 13th of July, so that we were well in the period when, according to the Swiss, chamois should be let alone. However, I give the hunter's answers as they were given to me. His description was certainly tempting, and as I talked with him I remembered how, some years before, having asked Melchior Auderegg, prince of Oberland chamois-hunters, what number he had killed the previous winter, I was told four; that was all he had bagged; and here this good fellow in the Tcherek valley, probably inferior as a shot, certainly inferior as a mountaineer to Melchior, looked upon a hundred as an average year's shooting. Surely there must be some English sportsmen who would like to see what chamois and bouquetin hunting really are: and why should not such men try the country about the Upper Tcherek? But there will be more to be said on this subject hereafter.

Under a bright sky, the first which had shone on us for some time, we sped down the valley of the Upper Tcherek, and were able to admire a grandeur surpassing that of the Alps. The vale is of huge size, the wide base often well-nigh level, and the sides very lofty and steep. Above these immense grass walls rise mountains of the greatest majesty and beauty; vast cliffs on which the snow may not rest; white pinnacles jutting far up against the sky, more abrupt than the Alps, seeming to tower far higher, and girding the fair valley with defences mightier even than the noble

peaks which rise by the waters of the Visp and the Arve.

For naked grandeur of mountain form the Tcherek valley is probably unequalled in Europe. In the far recesses of the Himalayas or Andes, perhaps in the Caucasus itself, though it is little likely, some vale may be found of yet more sublime and commanding beauty; but in the Alps there is nothing so great to behold. We were none of us anxious to leave the worship of our youth, or hastily to run after new gods. I shall have to say later on, that in many ways the Northern Caucasus is below the beauty of Switzerland; but no fond memory of early admiration, no sympathetic prejudice in favour of the land where we had wandered so long, could blind us to the greater splendour of this Tcherek valley. Half admiring, half reluctant, we felt the presence of a mountain glory beyond any we had known.

The huge peaks and ridges which are seen rise around the valley, with the exception of Dych-Tau, which shows admirably from some points, but is at a considerable distance to the north-west. The beautiful snow cone of this great mountain, though exceedingly steep, does not seem to offer any such obstacle as would stop a bold and skilful climber, and Dych-Tau therefore, when looked at from afar, with its lower part hidden by intervening ridges, appears not impossible; but, between the base and the cone, the mountain is guarded by terrible precipices, which on

a near view seem absolutely to bar the way to the summit. There may be a way through them by some channel or gully, but it may safely be predicted that this will be hard to find and hard to climb.

Three hours' march from our sleeping-place, the path led past the mouth of a mysterious glen opening opposite a noble pinnacle of steepest crag rising to the height of some 16,000 feet, and known by the simple and sweet-sounding name of Tsatchartikomikonkh. A sketch of this peak appears in Mr. Freshfield's book. Just by the end of the glen the Tscherek is crossed by a bridge, in the middle whereof is a stone door, which, as we afterwards found, was locked and barred every night as a precaution against cattle-lifters, whose marauding visits to the valley would seem to be frequent. Close to this bridge, on the left bank of the stream, is a chalet, the dwelling of a second guard against the disturbers of pastoral rest. The inmate of this place of defence greeted us with great civility, though with much wonder as to who we were ; so we made haste to assure him that we were men of peace, which was certainly true, for, had we been ever so much inclined towards cattle-lifting, not one of us would have known how to set about it. The temptation of the glen was such that we determined to give up the day to exploring it, and to pass the night at the chalet, if the occupant would consent, which he did on being promised payment ; so we sent Paul with the porters on to Kunim, and immediately began to make

our way up the glen, the powerful stream of which takes from its parent glacier the name of Dych-Su.

We desired to explore it, not only because it was of great beauty and wildness, but because we knew that it would lead us to the threshold of the greatest glacier system in the Caucasus, for it was certain that the torrent which roared down this glen or lateral valley came from a mighty icefield lying to the east of the great peak of Kotchan Tau, an icefield as yet altogether unexplored, though Mr. Freshfield and his companions had seen it from the ridge which in the lower part of its area forms its northern bank.

Sheep had made some sort of track up the valley, but it was a rough and stony path, and we experienced in all its fulness one of the drawbacks to a Caucasian walk. The upper parts of the valleys are often covered with boulders and stones of every possible shape and size. Sometimes they are bare; sometimes grass-grown; but always vexatious, wearisome, and shin-breaking. The most sublime scenery cannot be enjoyed, indeed can hardly be looked at, by a man who has to pick his steps among treacherous rocks, and who is continually finding himself in the position which may sometimes be seen in the streets of London when an unlucky passenger has stepped on the unsecured lid of a coal-cellar.

The glen was of wonderful grandeur; rugged, steep sides towering up to a vast height above the furious stream which roared down its base; just oppo-

site its opening the magnificent peak with the unutterable name, which had that morning a fitful glory playing over its noble outline; for though down in the vale it was calm as married love, up above a furious wind was raging, and from the crest of the mountain there streamed away the snow raised by the tempest, a wavering but beautiful halo made all golden by the rays of the eastern sun. From one nook, whence it seemed as if the base of the mountain must be close upon us at the foot of the glen, the view could only be described by the often misused word sublime. We halted, silent and impressed, to contemplate the wonderful sight. It was a moment never to be forgotten, certainly not likely to be forgotten by me, for at that place I had to divide a mutton-chop into four, a task of some difficulty, and performed by me in such a way as to discontent every one. Continuing our way, we came to the head of the Dych-Su valley, about two hours after entering it. The stream here flowed from the base of a steep mass of ice, the abrupt end of a glacier. Mounting on to this by the moraine on its right bank, we found ourselves on the edge of a vast icefield.

We had indeed reached the extremity of what I have described as the greatest glacier system in the whole Caucasian chain. From the point we had attained the huge sheet of ice extended for some eight or ten miles apparently, to the north-east, where it was surrounded at the head by an immense *cirque*, beyond which, tower-

ing over several other summits, rose an immense peak. The longest axis of the icefield or glacier was from the south-western end which we had reached to the north-east. The breadth may have been from three to four miles in the widest part. The ridge bounding the glacier to the south was cut by a great gap, through which flowed down to the main glacier, from a huge unseen reservoir, a stream of broken seracs.

Now this vast, grim icefield, solitary as a Polar Sea, untraversed, almost unknown, was of all others the place most tempting for those who love to learn the secrets of mountain regions. What an interest there would be in exploring these mighty untrodden glaciers, and who could say what weird beauty might not reveal itself in these silent ice-rivers flowing by the mighty hills? Probably none but native hunters and shepherds had ever set foot even on the edge of the huge icefield, and the greater part of it was unknown alike to natives and Russians. Very anxious were we to ascend to its head; and, scant as our time was, we would willingly have sacrificed part of our intended journey, and given two or three days to examining this region; but beyond the threshold we were not allowed to tread. To explore unknown glaciers in mist, rain, and snow were like seeking to pronounce on different colours in the dark; and that mist, rain, and snow were at hand it was impossible to doubt on the day when we made our way up the valley of the Dych-Su.

The morning had been magnificent, but the barometer, which had been falling for some days past, instead of rising for the fine weather, had fallen yet more; and as we ascended the valley numerous clouds began to steal over the hill-sides. Standing at the end of the glacier, we could see the peaks near its head, but evil mists were already gathering on their flanks, so much indeed that we could not be absolutely certain whether we saw the head of the glacier or not. The fair weather had been but a momentary respite. The black tempests of the Caucasus were coming down on us again, and with the little time we had it was clearly impossible for us to wait until the weather should clear enough for us to explore the great ice-field; so we sadly determined that we must go on our way the next day, leaving the huge glacier to be studied by some more fortunate or less hurried travellers. We determined, however, to see what we could at the time, and for this purpose we crossed the ice close to its end, and toiled up the long and steep slope on the left or northern bank of the glacier. Very trying this slope was, as such places commonly are. Who that has been in the mountains does not know the weariness and spleen that come of ascending a monotonous incline, where the hard and prolonged labour, with little for a time to break its monotony, causes a man sometimes to indulge in heretical speculation, and ask himself foolishly whether there will be anything to repay him for this drudgery, and whether

going up high places be not after all an error. Perhaps, considering how silliness of this kind fills a mind which is unfortunately idle, it may be considered as a kindly contrivance of nature that, in the ascent of a long grass slope, several successive crests are seen, each of which seems, from a little way below, to be the top of the ridge, and each of which, when reached, proves to be commanded by something greatly higher; so that wholesome excitement, and equally wholesome disappointment, distract the mind from too much indulgence in evil thoughts.

When, after floundering up an unusually steep slope, we reached at last the crest of the glacier's left bank, we looked on a sight of great beauty, though full of evil meaning for us. The mists had gathered closely and heavily round the mountains, revealing, however, here and there sharp peaks and vast escarped sides, with all that wonderful look of immense height and distance which summits and precipices have when seen above a great belt of cloud. But grand as the effect of the partly-gathered mist was, beautiful as were the glimpses of far off, and for us, alas, inaccessible mountain-tops, we read in the steadily increasing clouds the sign that bad weather was imminent, and that it was gathering for a long course.

The great glacier system on a portion of which we were looking down is supposed by Moore, from what he saw from the spot we had reached and from other places attained during his journey in 1868, to be

divided into two parts. One is the huge icefield of which we had touched the edge, and on which we were now looking down. The other, which is also probably of great extent, lies to the south of the first, separated from it by a bold ridge, and sending a stream of seracs into it through the gap which I have mentioned. Of the southern icefield I cannot speak from personal observation, as we could see nothing of it save the icefall which filled the gap. The Russian map gives scarcely any indication of the existence of either of those mighty glaciers. Turning as sadly as Moses on his mountain from the contemplation of the vast, untrodden solitudes which it was not to be our good fortune to explore, we ran down the slopes on the opposite side of the ridge to that by which we had ascended, and returned to the Tcherek valley by a small lateral glen. Ascending by this glen, Mr. Freshfield and his companions had reached, in 1868, the same point on the ridge which we had attained from the opposite side.

The rain which had long threatened, and promised (nor promised vainly) long to last, was falling heavily when we got back to the hut. Its old guardian, who had been out himself and got in a few minutes after we did, was welcomed with a warmth which puzzled him, he being apparently unacquainted with the deep form of human affection known as cupboard love. Without him, indeed, we could get nothing at all to eat that afternoon, and mountain air and continuous exercise

enable a man to digest a whole quarter of a mutton-chop, and even to feel anxious for something else during the day. Such is the bracing effect on debilitated London systems of Alpine or Caucasian life. Very simple was the food which the old man gave us, but worth describing, for the fashion in which he cooked it was most likely the same as prevailed in the days of Abraham and Isaac. Out of a paste of brown flour and water he kneaded cakes about the size of a Bath bun. These were browned round the wood fire, and were then buried in the hot ashes for some ten minutes, after which they were taken out thoroughly baked, or rather roasted, and as good as anything man could desire. With these he gave fresh milk, but this was a concession to our degraded tastes, for fresh milk is not what a Caucasian loves, or will touch if he can help it. His habitual drink is a mixture of sour milk and water, which later on will be described.

The old man was, I believe, a guard of the herds, but only a subordinate one, for towards the evening the cheery, stalwart hunter with whom I had talked at the upper chalet came in, and it was obvious that he was lord of the place. Conversation with him was unfortunately impossible, for, as Paul had gone on with the porters, we could do nothing on either side but express our goodwill by signs which, on such occasions, are usually found to be by no means so ready and fertile a language as travellers' tales would lead one to believe. It is curious how often a dis-

appointed look comes over the face of a man thus conversed with, showing but too clearly that a false impression has been given. A few tiny juggling tricks amused and hugely bewildered the honest hunter and a young shepherd, seemingly free of the place, who came in after dark. A very bad return the latter made for what he certainly enjoyed. Not among Swiss guides, Scotch gillies, or British seamen, have I ever heard such a snore as came from that youth. There was an agonising *sostenuto* about it which was very torture to a would-be sleeper.

We were off early next morning, wishing to get to Kunim by the middle of the day, and during the first part of our walk saw as much to admire as there had been higher up in the valley. I wish I could give some description of the snow region in this part of the Caucasus; but this cannot be done, for the excellent reason that scarcely anything is known of topography of the high country in this district. The map is worse than vague, telling hardly anything. Even the native hunters do not seem to trust themselves on the glaciers, and the great peaks and ice-wilds which compass the valley are as yet wrapped in virginal mystery.

Some two hours' march from the hut the valley loses its beauty. The high mountains are seen no more, and the grass slopes on either side are dull and uninteresting. Curiously rapid and curiously complete the change is from magnificence to dreariness. The

valley again becomes beautiful, though in a different way, below the villages, where great limestone cliffs rise above the rushing waters of the Tcherek ; but for two or three hours above Kunim there is nothing to gladden the eye of the wayfarer.

After about five hours' walk we came in sight of the first of a group of villages which stand in a part of the vale where it widens greatly, some large lateral valleys here opening into it. The village we first saw was Shkanti, on the right bank of the stream. Opposite this, but hidden from us for a while by a projecting shoulder, was Kunim, our resting-place for the day. Below this were Mukhol (visited by Mr. Freshfield in 1868), Tsegitel, and Kurdenet.

We had got then to the dwellings of the Mohamedan tribes on the northern side of the great chain, and I doubt whether anything stranger can meet men's eyes than these houses when seen for the first time. Deserted cow-sheds, vast empty dog-kennels, the home of some animal constructive like the beaver, but on a much larger scale ; anything but the habitations of men do these strange hamlets seem to the traveller. They usually appear at first to be completely empty, why I cannot tell, for there are plenty of people in them ; but perhaps it is because they are so utterly unlike the dwellings of human beings that the eye does not look for men, and therefore of course does not find them. On nearer approach, however, numbers of men, women, and children are found, and the

traveller discovers to his astonishment that these poor sheds are inhabited by a well-to-do and orderly race, remarkably handsome, stately in bearing, self-respecting, partly civilised in their ways, and sometimes very richly clad. With Eastern fixity, however, they cling to the dwellings which were good enough for their forefathers.

A description of the ordinary Caucasian house in the country we traversed on the northern side of the chain will show how exceedingly primitive the native fashion of building is. The walls are usually made of large, loose stones, and the roof of exceedingly massive timber, covered with earth, on which the grass grows thick and luxuriant. The hill-side cut away vertically forms often one side of the house, the ground being, of course, cut horizontally for the floor. There is never more than one storey. The houses generally possess a fireplace and chimney, that part of the latter which rises above the roof being made of wicker-work, plastered over with clay so as to prevent it from taking fire. The floor is commonly the bare ground, it not being the custom in the Caucasus, save in exceptionally luxurious dwellings, to board the earth over, or even to cover it with matting or straw. There is usually a verandah in front of the house, and the one or two tiny windows generally open into this. They are not glazed, being closed at night or in bad weather by shutters, and, owing to their very small size, the Caucasian interiors are exceedingly dark. Even at mid-

day they are gloomy, and in early evening they become as cellars for light. What the Caucasians would do in the winter time was to us a wonder never diminished. Candles are very scarce, and men, however well-disposed, cannot sleep eighteen hours a day. Perhaps the abnormal powers of conversation which we frequently noticed have been produced by the necessity of getting through time; for absolute indolence is a beatified state which in this world man does not seem to be able to attain.

Such description as I have been able to give will perhaps explain the cave-like look which was so noticeable in the dwellings in this part of the valley. The houses, partly scooped out of the hill-side, grass-grown as to the roofs, appeared rather to belong to those who burrow in the earth than to those who build on it, and seemed to suggest a race abiding, like Hamlet's father, in the cellarage. What manner of people they were who were content thus to dwell we were now to discover.

Passing the buttress which hid Kunim from our view until we were close upon it, we entered the strange place. Men, women, and children, and many of them gathered about our way, very curious, a good deal amused, and wondering much, but not in the least ill disposed. A man had been sent some distance up the valley to meet us, and led us to a place where we found gathered together Paul, the chief of the village, and a group of the local aristocracy. Said

Paul to the chief on our arrival :—These are the gentlemen whose coming I announced to you yesterday.

The Chief (very coldly).—They are welcome. A house has been got ready for them. Bid them go in.

Paul (rather abashed).—They are very worthy men, and are indeed persons of note and importance. They are under the protection of the Russian authorities, who esteem them highly.

The Chief (quite unmoved).—I doubt not, and have much regard for the gentlemen myself, but, as I have various pressing matters on hand, they will doubtless excuse me if I now leave them.—And with a very stiff salute the chief was off.

Now this was a cold reception ; of evil augury too in the first Mohammedan village we entered, where we looked for that grave kindness which the Mussulman is said to show the stranger within his gates. But it was entirely our own fault. We had committed a cardinal error, and we learnt a practical lesson which we did not forget. When Paul had been sent on the evening before, we had neglected to give him the Russian order on the chiefs of the villages, desiring them to render us all aid. Now this order was valuable in two ways. First, it obliged the chiefs to find us those two necessary things, food and lodging, which would often be hard to get without their assistance. Secondly, it had the subordinate but very important effect of making them think that we were travellers of some importance and worthy of good treatment. Nor

is this a matter of small moment, for the chiefs, naturally enough, are not disposed to give themselves any trouble about ordinary wanderers, who may be mere pedlers or vagabonds. There is a strong aristocratic feeling in these remote valleys, but also a strong feeling of hospitality; and once let the chief think that he is dealing with equals, with men who from his point of view are gentlemen, and then with the Mohammedan sense of what is due to a guest, he will be exceedingly anxious that the travellers shall fare well at his hands, and to that end will exert himself not a little; otherwise he will take but small pains. Nor can one say that he is wrong. An English country gentleman would not greatly bestir himself in order to do the honours of his house to a bagman or an exciseman.

The chief of Kunim then did not feel himself called on to pay us any special attention, though, being a just man, he took care that some provision should be made for us. His brother-in-law found us house-room and helped us to get what we wanted, so, being fairly well off, we consoled ourselves for our frigid reception by drawing a moral, which was, that on the north side of the Caucasian chain a man must be willing to blow his own trumpet now and then, and must not be afraid of blowing it loudly.

But we gave small time to deductions, sound or unsound. There was nothing to keep us at Kunim, so we determined to get on our way next day, but we had the afternoon to spare, and within an easy ride

was the great gorge of the Tcherek, the *Via Mala* of the Caucasus. For this accordingly, shortly after our arrival, Gardiner and I started on two Caucasian ponies, such rough trotters that I can only compare riding one of them to going down a moraine on a sledge. After descending the narrow streets of the village we came to the meadow-land forming the base of the valley, which here widens greatly, though it contracts rapidly lower down the stream. It would, I think, be hard to find anything uglier than this part of the vale. Vast, monotonous, green hills, poor in outline and little broken by crag or forest, rise all round, cultivation marking their flanks with hard straight lines. A valley leads away to the east, another to the west, but they are of the same dull, unvarying green, and in neither of them can aught be seen on which the eye loves to dwell for an instant. I believe that in Dauphiné there are valleys to be found as ill favoured, but never in Switzerland have I seen such ugliness, or anything thereto approaching. It can only be compared to a dreary bit of hill country in Lancashire, the Caucasian scale being of course some ten times greater. One redeeming feature, indeed, there was in the beautiful flowers which crimsoned some of the fields through which we passed, a frequent delight in the Caucasus, for many times afterwards did we suddenly come upon a like crimson, golden, or purple tapestry on meadow or hill-side. After leaving the prairie thus radiant with colour,

crossing an ugly grip, and then the main stream, we were out of the dull monotonous country, and entered a different region. The valley began to narrow, or rather, I should say, became a true valley again. On our right was a high grass-covered hill; on our left a mighty wall of red cliff. At one part of this there was a flight of eagles such as we had neither of us ever seen before, and have small hope ever to see again. They were sailing to and fro in front of the great rampart of rock, where probably are ledges and holes fitted for their eyries. At least only thus can I account for the large number of them. I counted twelve on the wing close together, and there were many more under weigh; some flying low down with their peculiar undulating sweep, often near enough to enable us to realise what the vast spread of their wings was; others fitting half way up the cliff, while far above it a few could be seen wheeling ceaselessly round and round, as the eagle usually does at great heights. Wonderful to watch is the strong and stately flight of these huge birds, but what an impression of weariness and hunger they leave. Their long sweeps close to the ground with their heads hung down, or that circular course for hours and hours up aloft, seem always to tell so plainly of the incessant quest for food and of an existence of hardest toil and frequent famine. They are stately, but seem very dismal nevertheless. Can any one imagine an eagle amusing himself as smaller birds do, or making the most of himself for his mate to admire him?

But I was suddenly withdrawn from the contemplation of eagles and their ways. My pony was, as I have said, the roughest of trotters, and certainly not remarkable for shape, but he had a courage worthy of a winner of the Grand National, and, yielding to the pleasure of letting the plucky little animal take the constant ups and downs of the road at his own pace, I got some short way ahead of my companion. Coming to the top of one rather steep bit, I looked round and saw no one, called loudly and got no answer. I was just turning to go back, when suddenly appeared Gardiner's pony, riderless, without a saddle, and wearing that peculiarly amiable expression which horses have when they have got rid of a human being and greatly damaged him in doing so. Visions of a broken girth, and of a friend kicked into the roaring Tcherak, rose in the instant. Or were there robbers in this savage valley, and had the horse got away in the struggle? Perhaps blood was calling from the ground for vengeance; so I rode back, realising, in the most definite manner, how very disagreeable it would be to be neatly picked off from behind a stone, without getting even a chance of returning the bullet. It must be unpleasant to be shot, but doubly so to be shot in an unsportsmanlike manner. However, all was well, for Gardiner, alive and vigorous, bearing like a jockey his saddle about him, came in sight as I went round a bend of the road. His horse had been loosely girthed at starting, and of course the girths had got

looser and looser as we went on, until at last, when the animal came to a steep incline, both saddle and rider had unavoidably gone over his tail, the rider being dropped just on the outer edge of the path with some eighty feet of desperately steep bank between him and the river. One kick, one tiny kick, would have sent him into the Tcherek, and by that waterway to eternity; but the kindly animal refrained, and, disentangling its feet from the girths, walked quietly on. Gardiner saved himself with some difficulty from going over the edge, picked up his saddle and followed, not in the smallest degree daunted by his very narrow escape. The horse was caught, and so tightly girthed this time that I am afraid he must have sadly reflected—this is the return I get for not kicking a man into the river when I could have done so with ease.

Closer and closer were the great sides of the gorge as we went on. The huge wall on our left continued, and the other bank became nearly as precipitous. The path came close down to the furious stream, which we crossed twice on frail bridges, and the gloom grew deep as we got further in the great mountain cleft. Rising a little presently on the left bank of the stream we reached the place where the gorge is narrowest.

The Tcherek, here streaming through what seems scarcely more than a rift in the mountains, is turned in this part of its course by a bold hill, leaving but small space for the waters to flow. Still further to narrow the torrent, a great rock on the right bank nearly bars

the channel, and by the base of this the river forces with great struggle its angry way. It will have the best of the rock in the long run, but at present it has much trouble to get past, and roars and hisses after the fashion of rivers checked and turned in their course. The rock which here blocks the gorge approaches the left bank so closely as nearly to touch it, only some five or six feet of bridge being required to carry the path over. Far, far below this bridge the seething water struggles through the narrow channel. On the other side of the rock is a deep cleft, now dry, but through which the river has at one time flowed, for indeed it has fought hard against its enemy. Going up the steep right bank of the gorge, we looked to the south on some thickly-wooded country, not of any great beauty. The stream was lost and could be seen no more.

It was growing late, and we made such haste as we could back to the village, near which we met some women who, after the candid but disrespectful fashion of women, laughed at us—laughed at us a great deal. They were themselves remarkable in one way, for though they were wretchedly dressed, almost in rags, each of them wore a wide zone, the front of which was of silver, partly gilt. Their laughter may have prejudiced me against them, but I did not think them comely.

Getting back to the house where the chief had

quartered us, we found it half full of curious villagers who had come to see what the strangers were like, and had thus our first experience of a practice rather trying to travellers in the Caucasus, though they have to learn from absolute necessity to tolerate it. The Northern Caucasians are a good-tempered race, well-disposed towards travellers, and rarely intentionally rude; but they are also, like a mastiff in a butcher's shop, more free and easy than is pleasant. That their presence can ever be a bore to those who come among them, that these latter can ever wish to be alone, are ideas which never enter their heads. The traveller finds that all day long the room in which he is lodged is crowded with stately natives, who watch him with a curiosity which nothing seems to abate. They are present at his getting up and at his lying down, at his eating and drinking, at his going forth and at his coming in. They discuss all he does in a language of course unintelligible to him, but their tones seem to indicate the keenest interest, and that interest never appears to flag. We found in the villages we visited that, as with the old kings of France, the *lever* and *coucher* were public; that men stared hard to see the last of us when we went out, and gathered immediately on our coming back; that while we stayed indoors we had, if the expression may be allowed, a perpetual 'at home,' the reception only ending when the lights were put out. Then at

last the visitors dispersed ; that is to say, our servants gently turned them out, and often would their voices be afterwards heard outside discussing the strangers—let it be hoped in a genial and laudatory spirit.

CHAPTER IV.

BEZINGI AND THE KOTCHAN TAU GROUP.

Prices in the Caucasus—Start from Kunim—Position of Bezingi—Caucasian Dogs—An unexpected Follower—Arrival at Bezingi—Difficulty in getting Food—Curiosity of the Villagers—The Invisible Princess—Delayed a Day by Bad Weather—Start for the Urban Glacier—Excellent Camping Place found close to it—Dych Tau—Walk up the Glacier—Wonderful Ice Valley at its Head—Tau Tetnuld, Djanga, and Kotchan Tau—Question as to the Possibility of Ascending the last-named Mountain—Tau Tetnuld probably Accessible—Col to the North-east of Kotchan Tau—Dych Tau and the Nameless Peak—Bad Weather again—Impossibility in consequence of passing over the Main Chain into Suenetia—Return to the Camping Place and to Bezingi.

THE next morning, July 15, promised ill, and we made ready to start, feeling nearly certain that we should see next to nothing of the country. We were rather melancholy therefore when getting off, Paul being especially sad. For the provisions he had bought the day before he had been obliged to pay what he considered a great deal too much, and he attributed this to the Gebi porters, who had, he imagined, told the men of Kunim the prices which we had paid at Gebi. This Paul resented quite as much as if he had been parting with his own money, and he swore terribly therefore

in the Georgian tongue. We bore the extortion with more philosophy than our honest servant, for such things had happened to us in our travels before, and besides the loss was not great. Whether great or little, however, we had to make up our minds this time, as often afterwards on our journey, not to fume much at being overcharged, for when we had to buy things overcharged we always were.

The Northern Caucasians are a primitive people, leading in the seclusion of their great valleys that pastoral life which is commonly associated with honesty, simplicity, and truthfulness. Far above the grade of mere barbarians who are dishonest in the same way as a dog is dishonest, civilised to some extent, but not enough to have learnt the innumerable wiles and trickeries which accompany civilisation and commerce, they should surely present an example of that straightforwardness and fair dealing which we believe to have prevailed in earlier days, and in a more simple state of society. To some extent they do; in some ways they are good people. Theft seems to be almost unknown amongst them, and murder or violence, if not unknown, are exceedingly rare; but in matters of sale they are nearly as sharp and as ready to take advantage of a stranger as tradesmen and innkeepers nearer home. The chiefs usually got us what we wanted, and their position did not allow them to demand anything for their cheer, though of course we took care that they were no losers; but when we bought for ourselves

we almost always had to pay a great deal too much, a state of things which was annoying at the time, but had its good side, as tending to make one less impatient of the constant struggle against imposition which has to be maintained at home, and less inclined to believe that one lives in specially fraudulent days. The desire to take an unfair advantage of a fellow-creature in a bargain seems to be a natural instinct of man, found in him whatever his sort or condition, and as deeply rooted in the breast of the simple shepherd as of the keenest speculator on the Stock Exchange.

We saw, however, the better side of the Caucasian character just before starting, for a pleasant young chief with whom we had talked the evening before came with two or three friends to say good-bye, and to wish us very cordially a successful journey. He was a relation of the princes of Urusbieh, where in good time we hoped to be, and gave us a letter to one of them commending us to his good offices. At the last moment the chief of the village appeared, but he had abated nothing of his coldness, and it was obvious that he thought us but small deer; so assuming a manner as haughty as our very disreputable appearance would allow, and tendering him the most frigid thanks which Paul could put into Turkish, we went on our way, impressing him, I think, somewhat by our severity, as will appear shortly. The lesson he had taught us was not lost upon us during our subsequent journey, but at the moment we were not much concerned about his

views, as we were thinking rather what the way to Bezingi would be like, for to Bezingi were we now bound.

That village is situated in what may be best described as the valley of the Western Tcherek. The stream which flows past Bezingi is called the Urban, but is, in fact, the upper part of the western branch of the river Tcherek. The eastern branch, which we were just quitting, is somewhat the greater of the two, and therefore the true river; but they are both rapid and powerful mountain torrents.

Our course lay at first nearly due north, over the green slopes on the north-western side of the valley. The day, bad from the beginning, became rapidly worse. The sky grew blacker and blacker, and the mist gathered over hill-top and ridge. Rain and darkness were coming, and, a good deal dejected by the bad weather, I got considerably behind my three companions, and was walking along pondering over the moistness of things when I was startled by a terrific din, and, turning round, saw the faithful Paul in sore danger from a combined attack of three unprincipled dogs. One huge brute had tried to pin him, and had been driven off with stones; but the moment after two other dogs came furiously out upon him, and while he was making fight against them the original aggressor stole up behind him, intending, with considerable cunning, to take him in the rear while he was defending himself from the onslaught in front.

If the crafty beast had succeeded, and Paul had been brought to the ground, as very likely he would have been, things might have gone ill with him, as it would have been exceedingly difficult to have shot the dogs without imminent risk of shooting the man. Fortunately I succeeded, for once, in sending a heavy stone straight which, I believe, broke the jaw of the dog who was coming up behind; at all events it sent him howling away, and we then drove off the other two. Now this may seem a very trifling incident to record, but in truth Paul was in considerable danger, and at different times so were others of us from the Caucasian dogs, jackal-like brutes, not resembling any breed known in England. Exceedingly savage, and with even more than the usual hatred of dogs for strangers, they have a good deal of the cunning of the wild beast. Constantly, when going into or out of a village, or approaching a shepherd's camp, the traveller is set upon by three or four of these ill-conditioned hounds, who often make a combined attack on him with considerable craft. He cannot shoot them, as to do so might breed a serious quarrel with the villagers, and he must trust to the straight delivery of big pebbles, unless, like Mr. Pelham in the gutter, he is content to stand still and scream for assistance, which certainly will not come. It is an ignoble and ridiculous form of danger, but a real danger nevertheless. Another vice almost as trying as the desire to flesh themselves on foreigners have the Caucasian dogs. They bark

all night long, and of the many curses which the wanderer in the Caucasus breathes, few are more deep and sincere than those with which he devotes to destruction the noisy curs who rob him of the sleep which, with some reason perhaps, he thinks he has earned.

The dogs got rid of, Paul and I joined the others, and we plodded together along the path which, after rising for some distance, led us into a desolate glen with high, treeless sides of grass, and a strong stream roaring down through it. We crossed by a frail bridge, and making our way up the steep valley-side, were soon enveloped in a dense mist. Suddenly there appeared through it a phantom horseman, who shortly overtook us, and with many expressions of goodwill thrust his companionship on us, and whose doings during that day and the two following ones were to us a mystery and a wonder. His story, which he unfolded to the very unwilling ears of Paul, was that the chief of Kunim, reflecting after we had gone that we knew nothing of the country, had sent him after us to act as a sort of courier or dragoman, and to tell the men of Bezingi of our worth and nobility. Certainly during three days he did what was possible in the way of bustling about without being of the slightest use, of telling us that everything was ready when he knew perfectly well that nothing was, and of getting in everybody's way, while he never tired of informing us that he had told the people about what

considerable persons we were, and how worthy of respect. Paul believed him to be a mere scamp who had joined us to get what he could from us for his very unnecessary services, and we were much exercised in our minds as to whether he had been sent by the chief or not. I believe myself that he was and that the head of Kunim, reflecting after our departure that he had shown scant courtesy, and that perhaps he had badly entertained great men unawares, had despatched this fellow as an act of civility. Our coldness on leaving the village may have had some effect. It is worth remarking, that sending a man to attend on a stranger is a very cheap piece of hospitality on the part of a Caucasian chief, for the follower thus sent expects to be paid, and well paid, for anything he does. If he accompanies the stranger for a short walk he considers it a day's work, and much the best course is to get rid of him with urbanity, but as soon as possible. Of course it is different when the man is worth keeping for anything he can do, as, for instance, when he is a hunter acquainted with the mountain tracks. Through a thick mist, hiding everything and wetting us through, we went on. Our path lay up the side of the valley we had entered, and then, as it appeared to me, over the ridges at the heads of two other valleys, but, with a fog which hid things twenty paces off, any attempt to form an idea of our course was mere guesswork. Presently we found ourselves on what was apparently

a great rolling down, and after walking over two undulations of this, we began to descend rapidly by some steep zigzags. When we had gone a short way down these, we suddenly passed out of the dense mist and saw Bezingi beneath us; a quaint, little collection of half-burrowed huts, just like those of Kunim, creeping up the hill-side, and made to nestle against it where that was possible. The place had a wobegone look, and the valley was hideous. Going rapidly down its high and steep bank by a well-contrived path, we made, being wet and dejected, but a very tame entry into Bezingi.

Our day's march is over, and we have reached our resting-place for the time, but, as is often the case in Caucasian villages, it appears at first as though things were not going to be pleasant. After some questioning we learn that the chief and another who rules under him are both away, and though we are shown into the house used for guests, the chance of obtaining food seems faint and remote. Matters look unpleasant for hungry men. The officious aid from Kunim declares that he will get us all we want, and disappears. After a time come some natives who have provisions to sell, but for these of course they demand exorbitant prices, and on poor, hardworked Paul devolves the long and weary task of beating them down. A crowd which has collected divides its rapt attention between us and the bargaining, but I fairly carry the day and become the attraction, for when I sit down

under the verandah and begin to write some notes, I cause an excitement even greater than that produced by the haggling over the price of a fowl.

A strange group it is which wondering and voluble gathers round me. First, there is an 'old, very old' man, clad in a sheepskin coat, with the wool turned inwards. Age has dimmed his eye, drawn wrinkles innumerable on his face, bent his once powerful frame, but has in no way dulled his more than feminine curiosity. Sidling gradually up, he first takes off my hat and examines it carefully, until indignant dumb-show causes him to return it. Then he watches the writing for some time over my shoulder, satisfies himself as to the texture of a tweed coat, and winds up with a careful examination of a hobnailed boot, always an object of great wonder to Caucasians. Closely following this senior's minute investigation are two stalwart fellows in full national costume, silver-sheathed poniard at the belt, silver cartridge cases on the breast, bearing themselves, despite their very petty curiosity, with the dignity which never forsakes a Caucasian of the higher ranks. Behind them is a host of natives of less degree talking to each other with wonderful volubility, and much envying the old man his thorough overhaul of the stranger. It is, however, apparently considered a privilege of age, for, happily for me, no one else attempts it.

There was one man who puzzled me much. He was continually coming, taking a good stare, and

then going away, returning shortly afterwards, having another gaze, and again departing, as though a very grubby Englishman shone, like Moses on the Mount, too much to be borne for long. I found out afterwards the cause of his intermittent watching. He was a servant of the chief's two wives, the great ladies of the village, and as, by no possibility, would Mohammedan rules allow them to come and look at us themselves, this special reporter was sent down to observe us, and bring up information bit by bit.

A very good creature indeed was the elder and more important of these two princesses, and most zealously did she strive in her husband's absence to do the honours of her house. She was, I imagine, rather scared when she first heard of our arrival, and preparations for entertainment are not quickly made in a Caucasian hamlet, so nothing appeared for a while, and Paul, thinking that nothing was forthcoming, bought what he could from the natives. But the good woman was working for us all the time. After some delay, only natural in such circumstances, she sent tea and cakes, the invariable first offering of Caucasian hospitality, and much later, when we had dined comfortably enough on what Paul had got, we heard to our horror that the princess had caused a sheep to be killed, and that we were shortly to feast thereon. Now men who travel on foot in the mountains are capable of much eating, and I think we were good examples of what Englishmen can do in that way; but a whole

sheep by way of dessert—it was too much. We sent a prayer to the princess to stay her too hospitable hand, and went to bed, thus intrenching ourselves, so to speak, against the mutton.

Next morning was dull and watery, and the mist came down nearly to the base of the valley. A crowd of natives collected directly we began to stir, and watched us all the forenoon with untiring zeal. We were hailed as old friends by a very dirty man from Gebi, who had joined us in the woods at the head of the Rion, and had crossed the pass with us. He was, we were informed, a pedlar, but he did not seem to have much to part with, except vermin, and that, I am afraid, must be a drug at Bezingi. He was really glad to see us, as Caucasians commonly are if they have travelled with one for awhile, and I hope he made his money in the village; but as he had nothing to sell, and the villagers had nothing to buy with, there must have been some difficulty in doing business, modern principles of finance not having been yet mastered in the Caucasus.

We strolled a little way up the valley in the afternoon, but the fog came far down the hill-sides, and we could see nought of the country, so we returned early to our mansion, of which a woodcut taken from a photograph appears on the title-page. This house was a fair specimen of an ordinary Caucasian dwelling on the northern side of the chain.

The morning of the next day, however, was, to

our great astonishment, fine, so preparation was made for an early start. We knew that the head of the valley was filled by a glacier, and we determined to go to the foot of this, to find some sleeping-place among the rocks close to it, and to devote next day to exploring its upper fields. We thought that we should perhaps be able, after a preliminary survey, to ascend Tau Tetnuld, a great peak rising at the head of the glacier, whence the Urban or Western Tcherek flows, and to descend on the southern side of the chain into Suenetia, if only the weather were fair; but as to this essential condition we had to hope strenuously, for the aneroid showed no recovery, though the sun was shining in a clear sky. The needle pointed low, as it had done for some time, and would not rise for the most cunning taps, but the barometer is now and then behind the weather and a prophet after the facts, so each man stated without the least believing it, that he was convinced the aneroid was a laggard this time; and Walker, Gardiner, and I started up the barren valley, Moore taking as usual the most disagreeable work, and remaining behind to collect the provisions, which of course were not ready at the time for which they were promised. We wanted only bread for two days, but this, though ordered the day before, could not be got without a couple of hours' delay and a good deal of energetic remonstrance. The invisible princess did all she could to help us, but even she, excellent creature though she was, had no more

idea of punctuality than the rest, and Paul and Moore had chafed sore before her loaves—very good ones by the way—came.

While they were sending imploring messages, we walked slowly up the Bezingi valley, which certainly is, as Johnson said of the actor Sheridan, dull, very dull. Accustomed to the Alps, which are never without a certain beauty, it seemed strange to us to find, in the heart of the mountains, anything so ugly. Some minor peaks began to show, it is true, but the vale itself was hideous; high monotonous walls of grass, broken here and there by dull crags; no beauty of form; very little variety of colour; a general sameness and dreariness; such are the characteristics of the valley of Bezingi, which, by a strange contradiction, leads to a mountain solitude of almost indescribable grandeur. Of the glories which lay beyond this ugly trench we soon got some inkling. After about two hours' walk from the village, we came in sight of a mighty wall of snow cliffs at the head of a great glacier. This wall was in fact the main chain of the Caucasus, the barrier between Europe and Asia here suddenly disclosed. The glacier falls but very little in its course, so that nothing is visible between its end and the huge cliffs at its head. They rise as from the sea.

We halted to look at the great wall, and while we were yet gazing Moore joined us, having with him Paul exhausted by much swearing at tardy villagers,

and a gigantic fellow called Mohammed, who drove with much dignity two tiny donkeys, on which were our sleeping bags, and the provisions which it had taken so much trouble to get. Sure thus of some sort of cover for the night and of food—two things absolutely necessary even for the most zealous mountaineer—we went contentedly on. There was much to observe round our path, for the traces of the gradual retreat of a great glacier up the valley were many and clear. I can best describe the upper part of it by saying that old moraine and moraine *débris* seemed entirely to cover its base. Some four hours from the village we reached a place from which the ice must have retreated at a comparatively recent time, the floor being here a desert of loose stones, through which we passed to the extremity of the glacier itself. This was the usual dirty stone-laden promontory of ice, in which these strange works of nature, so beautiful in their upper portions, are apt incongruously to end. Round its base there was much *débris*.

Our donkey-driver now proved a good and true man. He had said that he would take us to a place where we could camp for the night, and he led us over a mass of unstable stones, where his donkeys scrambled painfully along, to a spot on the left bank of the glacier close to its end, on arriving at which we rejoiced much, for it was indeed perfect for a bivouac. A little round dell, grass-grown, with a tiny waterfall

dropping into it and sending a beautiful stream through it, surrounded by the most savage desolation, it seemed a sweet oasis in the mountain wilderness. It was obviously a regular resting-place for hunters, for in one part a wall of loose stones had been raised as some protection against the wind, and there were signs of recent encampment. Here we made things as comfortable as we could—that is to say, we picked all the big stones out of the ground, so that we might have, as far as possible, the soft earth to lie on. Protection against the rain of course there was none, but in a mountain camp it was no small luxury to have a level surface on which to sleep. Opposite this camping place, on the other side of the great ice-stream, was a lateral glacier, and at the head of the ravine down which this struggled rose Dych Tau. Now Dych Tau is a wonderful mountain. The beautiful snow cone which forms the summit is, as has been said, cut away from the lower country by tremendous cliffs. These look all but absolutely vertical. Gullies and ledges may be found amongst them, but when seen from a distance they appear to rise as straight as a mainmast, and seem about as practicable for human beings as the shrouds of a mainmast might be for horses. At the head of the wild gorge down which the lateral glacier came, these gigantic precipices crowned by the graceful snow-cone were magnificent to look on, but we were not allowed to look on them long, for the jealous mist stole up from the

valley below and hid everything, so as there was nothing to see we worked until nightfall at picking the ground with our axes so as to bring it to a pleasant state of softness. The fine morning had not kept its promise, but the evening, which was foul, did. It rained and snowed during the night, and at 3.30 A.M., when we were to have started, the mist was as thick as a London fog. After two hours of darkness and damp things looked better, so we left the camp, getting at once on to the glacier, up which we struck a south-westerly course for the mountains at its head.

The great Urban glacier, which we were now traversing, has its origin in the snowfields which lie under Tau Tetnuld and Kotchan Tau. These mountains, united by a vast curtain of cliff, which the natives call Djanga, are, roughly speaking, east and west of each other, Kotchan Tau being the easterly summit. The ice-streams which descend on their northern sides, hemmed in for awhile by rocky barriers opposite the two great mountains, meet and unite under Djanga, forming the Urban glacier, which pours down through the wide valley opening opposite the great curtain of cliff. The course of this glacier is about N.N.E. and S.S.W., and is at right angles to that of the two parent ice-streams which meet under the mighty precipices of Djanga. We did not at the time when we started know anything of the sources of the Urban glacier, the map being vague and almost worthless. The short description just given is drawn from

what we discovered during the day ; but it was obvious from the first that, by ascending the glacier to its head, we should command the snowfields from which it is fed, and that, standing in the heart of the noblest mountain region in the Caucasus, we should be able to form some idea of the true position of Tau Tetnuld and of the mighty Kotchan Tau, perhaps even to see a way to the summit of one or both of these great peaks.

To ascending the glacier therefore we addressed ourselves, and very easy work it was. Walking first of all on nearly level ice, we passed the wild ravine leading towards Dych Tau, a deep, gloomy gorge, with a precipitous col at the head of it, beyond which rose the huge crags of the mountain the third in height of Caucasian peaks. After passing the ravine, our course lay for two hours along the nearly level glacier. There is no icefall, and the rise is very gentle, but as we went on we came to a maze of crevasses, so we got with small trouble on to the left bank, and after scrambling for awhile across the stony hill-side, came to a grass-grown moraine, along which we walked for a considerable distance, until, being near the head of the glacier, we descended on to the ice, now quite free from crevasses, and went on towards Djanga as over a high road.

The glacier valley of which we had now traversed the greater part, belongs to the severest style of mountain grandeur ; on the left bank are some grass slopes, and then a huge wall of crag ; on the right is

unrelieved crag rising sharply from the glacier to a great height, and surmounted by a bold and beautiful pinnacle. Leaving this on our left, we passed, some four hours after leaving the sleeping-place, through the vast gap by which the Urban glacier flows forth, and stood presently under the heights of Djanga.

The wonderful sight which we now looked on, I despair of being able in any degree to render in words. It was not merely the beauty and majesty of the great mountains which caused wonder and admiration; it was even more, the utter wildness and strangeness of the valley over which they rose; its complete unlikeness to anything I had ever seen in the course of many years' wandering in the high Alps. It was indeed a mountain fastness, so secluded and so stern that it seemed not only as if man had never entered it, but as if man was never meant to enter or invade its beautiful but terrible solitude.

To our right was Tau Tetnuld, a 'tall pyramid with wedge sublime,' towering over a broad glacier which, in an undulating icefall, descended between it and a rocky barrier opposite. Uniting Tau Tetnuld to Kotchan Tau was the great curtain of Djanga, a vast wall of rock and snow, looking, as we stood in front of it, almost vertical. Of course it was not so, but standing there under its shadow, the cliffs seemed to rise with a marvellous abruptness, which was all the more striking that they sprang straight from the level glacier at their base, unbroken by slope or shoulder.

Literally it seemed as though a man standing on the glacier might put his hand against the wall which rose straight some four or five thousand feet above him.

At the end of this barrier, bearing S.E. from us, rose Kotchan Tau, highest after Elbruz of Caucasian peaks, and even as we were looking, the mist which had clothed the upper part of the mighty mountain cleared away, and it was revealed to us in all its grace and nobleness of form. Tier after tier of steepest escarped cliffs rose on its side, and above them was a fan-like ridge, so thin seemingly that its huge rock articulations looked to me from below like the delicate fibres and veins in a leaf. Above these was the crest of the mountain, a sharp arête marked by a series of gentle curves of great length covered with a new garment of fresh snow. Kotchan Tau shone with dazzling brightness under the eastern sun, and I think the eye of man could hardly rest on a more noble and beautiful mountain than it looked on that summer morning.

And will the master ever come for the virgin so clad in bridal array? Is the great peak accessible? Will cragsman ever stand on the highest point of that keen ridge and look down from it on lovely Suenetia on the one hand, and the wild Tcherkess country on the other? Well, of mountains yet unattacked, as of ladies yet unwooed, it is exceedingly difficult to predict anything, but certainly going up Kotchan Tau will be

no work for the timorous, or for those weak of limb or unsure of foot. From a col to the east of where we stood, to which snow slopes of small difficulty lead, rises the north-eastern arête of the mountain, for some distance not impracticable. This then could, with much step-cutting, be climbed up to a certain point, and a considerable height on the mountain reached, but the higher part of the arête is irregular and broken, looking altogether impossible for human feet, while the slopes below are of terrible steepness, the final ridge being also apparently of extraordinary difficulty. Owing to its gentle curves, it might be very hard for a man to know when he had reached the summit of the mountain. We certainly could see no way thither, but still ways have been found over places which, from below, seemed quite impassable, and there are peaks in Switzerland now frequently ascended which, no very long time ago, were deemed altogether beyond the powers of man, so I am not prepared to say that, with two first-rate guides, a good mountaineer able to give plenty of time to the peak, willing to sleep out many nights, and to persevere after unsuccessful attempts, might not, if blessed with perfect weather, reach the summit of Kotchan Tau; provided always that he could get supplies of food sent up from the village, which he would find by no means a very simple or easy task.

As to Tau Tetnuld, the case is different. There seems to be no reason why that mountain should not

be ascended, and very likely the ascent would prove to be of no excessive difficulty. An icefall, clearly practicable, which has been already mentioned, descends between the northern side of the mountain and the cliffs opposite. From the level glacier on which we stood this icefall could be reached with ease, and then threading a way among crevasses and seracs, the traveller could get to a col under the final peak of Tau Tetnuld. So far indeed the way is occasionally though rarely traversed, for the col marks a pass to Suenetia, which has been crossed at times by the hunters of Bezingi. From this col the top of Tetnuld's cone could seemingly be reached, and a very fine peak Tau Tetnuld is, though from this side it hardly looks as fine as it should, for Kotchan Tau is such a much higher and grander mountain that poor Tetnuld is sadly dwarfed by the comparison. To ascend or attempt either of these peaks, it would be necessary to sleep out a good deal higher than we did, and for this we found a perfect place. Near the end of the grassy ridge which we traversed on the left bank of the Urban glacier is a beautiful little dell, much resembling that in which we camped lower down, being sheltered, as that is, from the wind, and watered by a little torrent.

The col which has been described as lying at the foot of the north-eastern arête of Kotchan Tau looks down on the further side on the great icefield of the Dych-Su glacier. Over the col a pass to this glacier

might probably be made, but Moore, who had seen the other side during his journey in 1868, was of opinion that the descent on to the Dych-Su would be far from easy. About N.N.E. of the col rises a nameless peak of great height, not marked in the Russian map, and beyond this is Dych Tau. We could not, however, see either of these peaks from the place we reached on the glacier, as they were hidden by intervening cliffs. We had intended to attempt the ascent of Tau Tetnuld, and to pass into Suenetia. We could not have done so on the day I am now describing, as there was not time for more than a preliminary survey, but we meant, if there was any promise in the weather, and if we found a sleeping-place high up, to carry our little baggage up there, and thence to try pass and mountain. A camping-place we found, also there was promise in the weather, but it was promise of the wrong kind. While we were yet gazing on Kotchan Tau, the clouds, which had lifted for but a short space, again wrapped its noble summit, and behind us the mist was stealing slowly but steadily up the great Urban glacier, looking, as is often said of fog-banks at sea, like the side of a house. In a few minutes it was on us, and Tau Tetnuld, and Djanga, and mighty Kotchan Tau were hidden, to be seen no more by us save from afar. There was nothing for it but to get home, so in the vile half darkness we plodded our weary way back, going first by the grassy ridge, and then, as the crevassed part of the glacier could not be

passed in the fog, along the base of the moraine, over an abomination of loose stones. When we reached our resting-place, the weather seemed, and indeed was, hopeless. The mist was dense; snow was beginning to come down, and the barometer had fallen greatly. It was obvious that in such weather as was coming one might as well go and delve in the crags for gold, as seek to go up an unknown peak, or over an unknown pass, so we came to the sad conclusion that it was reserved for more fortunate wanderers to occupy the further dell, and from it to ascend Tau Tetnuld, or, if very ambitious, to attempt Kotchan Tau and reach its top, or break their necks, as chance might befall. We determined to go back to Bezingi, and well that we did so, for the night was a savage one; well also that we gave up our expedition, for it rained in the valleys and snowed in the mountains for the next four days.

To Bezingi therefore we strode back through drenching rain, which, I am sorry to say, was the cause of harm to our excellent servant Paul, for, being wet through, he set to work to cook on arriving, without changing anything, and thereby got a cough which was troubling him much at the time when he left us. Our absence seemed to have sharpened the curiosity of the natives, who crowded round us wondering as though they had never seen us before, and when the time came for going to sleep, there was considerable difficulty in getting rid of the good-tempered

but chattering and tiresome crowd. It was a wild night, with heavy rain and furious gusts of wind. We should have fared ill if we had stayed at our sleeping-place by the glacier.

CHAPTER V.

TCHEGEM AND THE GORGE OF THE DJILKI-SU.

Departure from Bezingi—The Invisible Princess—The Pass to Tchegem—Its Resemblance at one part to the Great Scheidegg—Striking View of the Entrance to a deep Gorge—A Friendly Chief—The Village of Tchegem—Reception there—The Chiefs informed of our probable arrival by General Loris Melikoff—Curiosity of the Men of Tchegem—Sketch of a Reception by a Caucasian Chief—Absence of any Attempt to obtain Gifts—The Gorge of the Djilki-Su—Bad Weather again—Capture of a live Bouquetin—A Man of Gebi—Conversation with an aggrieved Caucasian—Doubt as to there being just Cause for Complaint.

EARLY on the morning of the next day (July 19th), we bade farewell to Bezingi. The princess of course remained invisible. A man leaving an English country house, of which the hostess was in bed, would not startle British propriety more by proposing to go upstairs to say good-bye to her, than we should have offended against decorum if we had said that we should like to thank the princess ourselves. Such a thing could not be, but funnily enough, though she could not see us, she could see our servant, so Paul went on an embassy to her, paid her for our entertainment in the manner which will be described later on, and presented her with what seemed the very inappropriate gift of an

eight-bladed knife. We had nothing else to give her, and I am glad to say that the good matron was delighted. She had never seen such a thing before, and showed it immediately to the younger wife, who felt and expressed the same pleasure as an English lady would who saw her step-sister very much better dressed than herself. So primitive are the people of Bezingi that this knife was a great success. The brother of the chief, who saw it before it was given, took Paul aside to tell him that there was no occasion to pay anything to his sister-in-law, but that it would be quite enough if we would give him a similar knife. As he had done nothing whatever for us, we did not fall in with this considerate view, but we were truly glad to please the invisible princess who had indeed been an excellent hostess, showing in her poor village, and from her mud hut of a house, the true spirit of the noble Mohammedan hospitality of which the tradition is not yet pale among this simple and kindly race.

Leaving Bezingi, we struck up the left bank of the valley, getting glimpses of some parts of it to the north, which seemed much finer than the dull banks which rise above the village. After walking over easy grass slopes for about an hour and a half, we came in sight of the highest point of the pass to the adjoining valley of Tchehem, for which we were now bound, and were much struck by the resemblance of this part of the way to the great Scheidegg, as seen from the slopes above Grindelwald. The mighty cliffs of the Wetterhorn, it

is true, were wanting. So were the numerous cantines of the Swiss route. The Caucasians are a benighted and abstemious race, content with a moderate amount of food, and allowing long intervals between their meals. I wished much, as our way brought the well-known pass to my mind, that I could have transported one of the Bezingi men thither, and shown the ignorant shepherd how, where advanced civilisation prevails, men are expected, indeed urgently begged, to eat and drink ten times in the course of a two hours' walk.

That jackal-like dogs endeavoured to cut off the stragglers of the party; that the rain came down in torrents; that, when we reached the top of the pass, we were enveloped in dense mist, were things natural and to be anticipated. We bore them with philosophy—that is to say, we grumbled and swore with the secret underlying pleasure which an Englishman always feels at having something to grumble and swear about; but our repining was soon silenced, for descending a little, and getting out of the mist, we looked on a strange, weird country, quite unlike any we had ever seen in previous travel. Before us was a wide valley making a large sweep just opposite the place where we stood, and trending away towards the south-west. Then, at the part where the turn began, there was on the further side of this valley a great opening in its side, a vast portal of tremendous cliffs, beyond which lay a deep, mysterious gorge, very sombre from its narrowness and from the great

height of its precipitous sides. We could trace this vast gloomy ravine far back among the hills. Anything so strange as the entrance to it no man of us had ever seen, and I can only compare it to one of those weird mountain recesses which Doré has imagined; indeed, looking at that strange gateway, it seemed easy for once to believe in the supernatural. Those huge portals might have been opened by some mighty spell, and in that gloomy gorge running into the heart of the mountains surely there might be dragons or great serpents crawling in dark recesses where the sun never came; some unholy mystery at the end; an enchanted castle, or a warlock's haunt. At the foot of this great opening in the valley-side lies the village of Tchegem, which, however, we could not see for some time, it being hidden by rising ground in front of us. On our right, as we descended, rose a noble limestone precipice, in front of which the eagles were flying to and fro, and we seemed to excite the curiosity of one huge bird, for he flitted over our heads for a time with perfect and, I am bound to say, justifiable contempt for the revolver shots which we fired at him. Before getting to Tchegem we had to pass another village standing on the right bank of the lateral valley we were descending. The inhabitants stared at us with their usual intense but good-tempered curiosity, and a handsome, well-dressed horseman rode up to Gardiner and myself, who were lagging behind the others, and made us a long speech, which I doubt not was amicable. Of course

we could not understand a word of it, and Paul was some distance ahead, so I adopted the course I had before once or twice followed under similar circumstances, and replied to him at some length in English. He listened with great attention, then with many smiles shook us both warmly by the hand and galloped away. They are a friendly race.

Getting down to the base of the great valley we saw Tchegem, which is situated at the end of the gorge on the north bank of the stream running through it. A great cliff rises above the village, and it would be difficult perhaps for the traveller to find a sight more striking than this group of houses clustered on the barren slope at the mouth of that strange ravine with the towering cliffs above them. Most genial was our reception. The authorities at Tifis, with the consideration which they showed in everything, had written to General Loris-Melikoff, the Governor of Vladikafkaz, requesting him to give us all aid, and he had taken the trouble to send word to Tchegem that we were to be well treated, an act of kindness on his part which it would be difficult to acknowledge too warmly, and for which, to our great regret, we had no opportunity of thanking him. A small squadron of boys, who had apparently taken on themselves the office of scouts, came out from the village and escorted us in. On arriving we found a crowd already assembled, from which two handsome fellows stepped forth and bade us welcome. They were two of the chiefs

of Tchegem, which was governed apparently by a triumvirate of three brothers, the eldest and most important of whom was, we were informed, absent; but we missed him not, for the two younger ones did the honours of their village with much grace and hospitality. We were shown into the house got ready for us, which was of sufficient dignity to have a courtyard in front of it. Into both poured the crowd after us, and we found that in the matter of curiosity the inhabitants of Tchegem were in no degree behind those of Kunim or Bezingi. Something superior to the men of both those places they seemed to us in face and stature. I do not think I have ever seen so many handsome and stalwart fellows together as those who were looking at us with more than a schoolboy's curiosity. So anxious were they to see everything, that not only did they fill the room, but even the little window was packed with the heads of grave and bearded Mussulmen. Although they were perfectly good-tempered, it must be said that this persistent curiosity, allowing one no respite from the public gaze; was irritating, and I was inwardly cursing the inquisitiveness of the villagers when an idea occurred to me which made me hesitate and doubt whether I had any right whatever to be angry. If the case were reversed, I thought. If a Caucasian chief in the national costume—to wit, a long robe with silver car-touche cases on the breast, a great lambswool cap, a huge poniard hanging from his belt, leggings and

mocassins—were to ride suddenly one evening into a Surrey village and seek lodging there, what sort of treatment would he receive from the boors who would probably be assembled at the public-house door? At first they would most likely be silent from a dull astonishment. After a short time they would begin heavy chaff and jokes with each other about the stranger, whom they would designate by the foulest words known to the English language. In a short time more the chaff would be addressed to him, and as he would certainly be utterly bewildered by it, indignation would be roused, and the coarsest insults would follow. In the end, the unhappy Caucasian would probably be subjected to some horseplay, and possibly even be well thrashed, on the simple ground that he was quite unlike any one whom the villagers had ever seen before. In some places in the North of England he might be half kicked to death. Now these things might happen in our own dear land—it is not long since some men riding bicycles through an English village were pelted with big stones by the inhabitants—and reflection, therefore, went far to reconcile me to the keen and abiding curiosity of the good-tempered Caucasians.

After we had waited some time, tea and cakes, the certain first-offering of a chief's hospitality, appeared, and here perhaps may be given a slight sketch of the reception and treatment of travellers in a village of the north-western Caucasus.

They were received by the chief, to whom they present the general order obtained from the Russian authorities, which renders it obligatory on him to give them all reasonable aid. His own sense of hospitality will cause him to construe this in a liberal sense, and the strangers forthwith find themselves in the pleasant position of honoured guests. After a short delay they are shown into a house which is set apart for them during their stay, or perhaps, though this is less likely, into a room in the chief's own dwelling. Then, after a much longer delay, which is only natural considering the limited resources of the host, a servant appears bearing the huge samovar, a teapot, loaf sugar, and small cakes made from brown flour which are often excellent. But the tea and the white sugar are real luxuries. It need hardly be said that they are not to be bought in these remote villages, only a very small stock being possessed by the well-to-do inhabitants, and the chief when he bestows these things on his guests is doing quite as liberal a thing as the Englishman who has up from his cellar his best and most costly dry champagne. The chief will most likely be present at this preliminary eating and drinking, standing in the presence of his guests, and, in accordance with the stately spirit of Oriental courtesy, declining to be seated unless much pressed. Afternoon tea over he withdraws, that is to say, withdraws as host, but he will very likely return almost immediately as a private spectator. Now comes a pause, a very long pause,

during which the travellers write their notes, clean their arms, discuss what shall be done next day, speculate as to the weather, do anything in fact to get through the time, growing at last wofully hungry in spite of the tea and cakes, and beginning to doubt whether any dinner is coming, and whether it would not be best to roll themselves up and 'take it out in sleep.' But just as they are getting quite famished and hopeless a blessed sight appears. There enters a servant bearing a small, three-legged table, very like what the English upholsterers beautifully call an 'occasional' table. It has already served for the tea and cakes, but now bears a much more substantial load. When the cloth, which is laid over the dinner, not under it, as in the West, has been taken off, there appears the greater part of a sheep boiled, and neatly arranged on flat loaves. Very likely there is served with it a kind of mutton broth. Well cared for thus, the travellers fall to, and when they have done, their servants, joined for good-fellowship's sake by the servants of the chief, may be relied on to finish every scrap that remains. Mattresses and coverings are then sent in by the host, who probably comes to say good-night, and the guests go to sleep, so far as seems good to the village dogs, and to the insects, inevitable bedfellows.

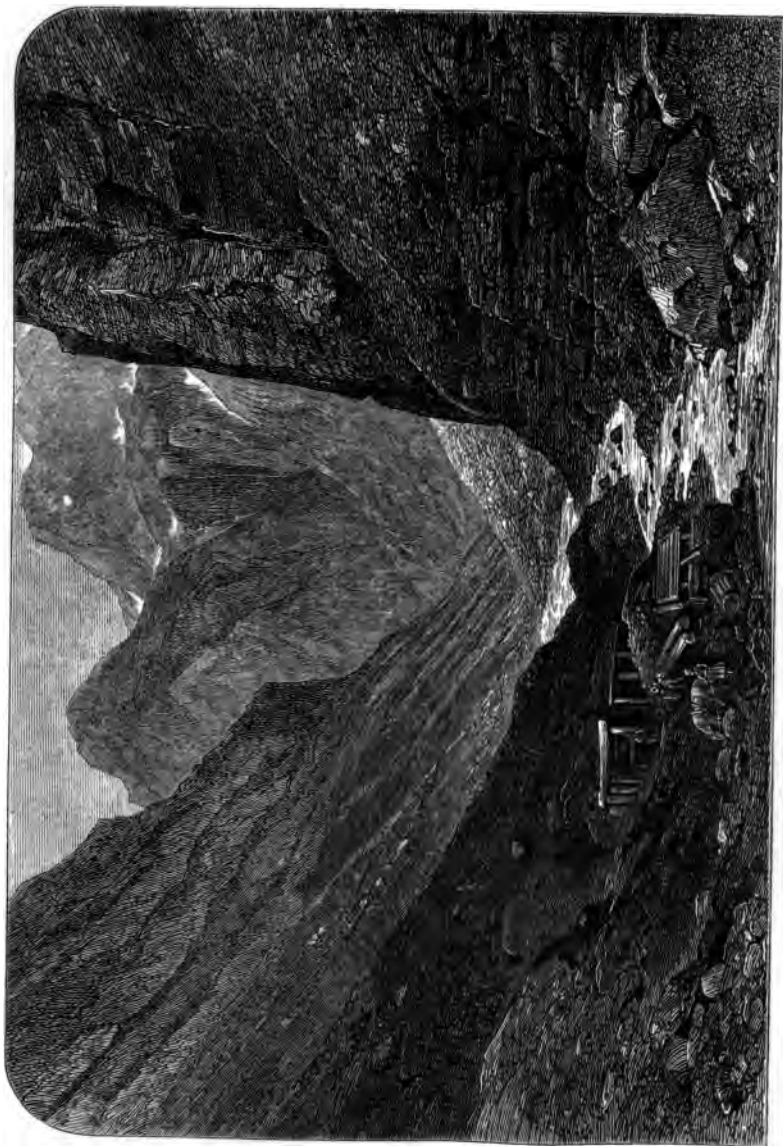
After the *thé d'honneur* was over on this evening, we let the curiosity of the villagers have full swing, and it really seemed to surpass even that of the

people of Bezingi. They handled everything they could, and talked over each object with infinite volubility. Aneroid, revolvers, watches, telescopes, all excited the most intense interest, and yet with some of these things they must have been acquainted, for the place is now and then visited by Russian officers, and men from the village go sometimes to the Russian post at Vladikafkaz. As to revolvers, indeed, the youngest chief carried a small one in his belt. Nevertheless, I do not think that in Central Africa the inhabitants could have shown more curiosity; but with all this inquisitiveness, which made them almost take the things out of our hands to examine them, these singular people were not wanting in dignity, or in the feeling of what was due to strangers. They pawed everything we would let them paw, but they asked for nothing; and so we found it in other places. During the whole of our journey on the northern side, I do not recollect a single instance of a Caucasian's asking for any of the things we carried with us. As for stealing from us, I do not believe that such an idea ever entered their heads.

Rain fell during the night, and the morning was dull and threatening with heavy mists hanging over the hills. We determined to give up the day to exploring the great gorge, now darker than ever under the lowering sky, and started early in the forenoon, following a slightly marked track on the left bank of the stream. It was certainly a wonderful defile. At first the limestone cliffs on our right, that is, on the

northern side of the gorge, were all but absolutely vertical, and further on the sides of the ravine, though sloping enough to allow of vegetation, were marvelously steep. The stream which flowed along the base was small, but of great beauty, and sprang, the natives had told us, from a glacier at the head of the ravine. The rivulet is called the Djilki-Su, and gives its name to the great gorge, of which Walker took a photograph from a point a little above Tchegem. From this photograph the engraving on the opposite page has been taken. We had hoped to explore the whole of the huge cleft and reach the glacier of which the natives had spoken, but we soon found that there was no possibility of our seeing anything if we did so, for the mist gathered over the ridges on each side, and then came steadily down until it seemed like a roof over our heads. There was no chance of its lifting that day.

Shepherds or hunters had made the faint track, which sometimes rose a little on the steep slope, sometimes ran by the stream. After following this line for some time, we came to a rough bridge spanning the little torrent at a place of singular wildness and beauty. About a hundred yards higher up there was a turn in the gorge, and just at this point we saw a young bouquetin feeding on a tiny bit of level ground at the foot of the cliffs on the left bank of the stream. Paul is not a hunter, never having had the opportunity of becoming one, but he has all a hunters' instinct, and



THE MOUNTAIN OF THE MOUNTAINS

he was off in an instant, rushing along the right bank, under cover of brushwood, to head the animal. This he did, and dashed across the rivulet just above the bouquetin, who immediately turned to go down stream, but seeing me on the bridge, where I had mounted guard with my revolver, and having no means of knowing that with the said revolver I should certainly have missed him, hesitated for a moment, looked at the cliffs on the left bank which were clearly impossible even for a bouquetin, and then at those on the right, by which he could certainly have got away if only he could have found courage to cross the rivulet, but this, strange to say, he would not do, though at that point the stream was shallow enough. Twice he looked at it; twice, like a horse bad at water, refused; then tried to scramble up between Paul and the left bank, but Paul promptly knocked him over with a big stick, and then grappled him by the horns. The bouquetin struggled desperately, as well he might, but the Mingrelian was not to be shaken off, and Peter Knubel shortly coming up, the two bound the hapless beast.

Now a bouquetin is a sufficiently difficult animal to kill with a good rifle after a long and wary stalk, but to catch a bouquetin alive is certainly not an every-day performance, and there was reason, I think, for some little exultation. The abominable state of the weather made it useless to ascend the gorge any further, as we could have seen nothing, so we determined to go back

to Tchegem with the captured animal. We returned thither accordingly, our two men alternately carrying the beast, and as I observed what hard work it was for them, I wondered greatly how a man who is fortunate enough to kill a full-grown bouquetin manages to bring it back from a long distance, and over places of real difficulty, perhaps of danger. It must test to the utmost mountaineering skill and strength. We left the gorge with great regret at not having been able better to explore it. Although there is a track and a bridge over the stream, the fact that a bouquetin was feeding so low down, shows how rarely men penetrate the great ravine.

We had thought it impossible for the sons of Tchegem together assembled to talk more than they had done the night before; but we were mistaken. The bouquetin—and they were much astonished at our having got him alive—excited even greater volubility than that of the previous evening, and as this became rather tiresome, and as, moreover, each man considered himself entitled to examine, in his own way, the unhappy brute, we thought it best to decree his execution rather than let him be gradually done to death by the curious. His throat was accordingly cut, and I was much struck by the wonderfully bright colour of the blood; also by the vigorous circulation which these animals possess. From an artery in the throat the blood jetted to a distance of more than ten feet. Of course we should much have liked to have kept the poor bouquetin alive, and taken him with us,

but with the long journey we still had before us that was obviously an impossibility. A man from Gebi, however—of course there was one in the village—put us to shame, for when the animal was dead he stepped forward and said that he would have given ten roubles for it to take back alive to his village. Now, as he had just watched the killing of the poor beast with amusement and complacency, there was a naked audacity in this statement which much increased my respect for the lights of the men of Gebi.

There appeared this afternoon the eldest brother of the three, principal chief of the village, a splendid fellow, some six feet three or four high, and singularly handsome, save that he was marked with the small-pox. We noticed this disfigurement in a large proportion of the inhabitants of Tchehem. In the evening we dallied with a 'trifling foolish banquet' of a whole sheep, enlivened by a discussion which was of some interest, though, like most discussions, it did not change opinion. Moore maintained, somewhere about the period of the fourth or fifth chop, that the great drawback to mountain excursions was the habit of eating to which men are prone; that by energy, perseverance, and self-denial, it would be possible to subdue, ultimately perhaps almost to get rid of this failing, and that in time a man might walk over glacier and mountain undisturbed by the craving for food which adherence to a vicious practice causes most people to feel. I maintained the opposite of this, and though I did not succeed in convincing Moore, I am

glad in the interest of mountaineers to say that the invaluable ex-Secretary of the Alpine Club has not yet attempted to put his views in practice, resembling in this manner of treating his doctrine some eminent people of our time who have contented themselves with preaching moral excellence.

We had some interesting talk during the evening with a very pleasant and intelligent Caucasian, who was, like ourselves, on his travels, for he was merely passing through Tchegem, to which village he did not belong; indeed, it was not known to our hosts, the chiefs, of what district he was. He began by asking us if we could tell him to whom ought to be attributed some curious steps in the rocks, and some caves, partly artificial, which he had been told were to be found in the neighbourhood, for, he said,—‘The forefathers of the men of Tchegem did not make these. They are the work of some people who before inhabited this country. Can you, who are more learned than I am, tell me who these people were?’ We gave him such faint sketch as was possible of prehistoric man, and he then talked to us for some time about our journey, the state of the country, and so forth. Presently there was an interesting conversation between him and one of our party, who, I should say, leaned to conservative views.

Said the Englishman—Are you and the people about you content with the Russian Government? Does it treat you well?

The Caucasian.—No, it does not. The Russian Government does not deal justly with us. It is now confiscating much of the property of the proprietors (he was speaking, of course, of the native aristocracy), and in its conduct towards them does not, having strength on its side, consider what is fair. But this is indeed to be expected, for the Russian Government is a bad sort of government. Everything depends on one man, and one man all alone is very likely to make mistakes. How can he know all about the people he rules when they are of many races? Now with you it is different. You are governed by a great council (I wonder how on earth he knew this), and a great council of many men is not so likely to make a mistake as one man. Then they will know better what is right for different parts of the country.

The Englishman (carried away for the moment by Tory feeling).—Not always, by any means. Parliament may sometimes be very bad. The last Parliament we had wanted to change everything that was established in the land.

The Caucasian.—I cannot tell about that; but this I say, that a council of many men is less likely to make mistakes than one man alone, who may err grossly at any moment (and here, I think, the chief had the best of it). The Russian Government does not respect the rights men have hitherto had. There are some in constant dread of having their property confiscated. There is Prince Ismail of Urusbieh.

He has a great forest which has always belonged to his family. The Government is going to confiscate that, which surely is as unjust as anything can be. He is now at Vladikafkaz seeking to prevent this. I say that the rights which men in a country have always possessed should be respected by the Government, and the Russian Government does not respect ours. Formerly we had slaves of our own who did our work for nothing; now this is not allowed, and we have to pay men to work for us.

This was a sad falling off. The Caucasian had seemed at first to speak like a respectable Liberal, pointing out the essential vice of a despotic government, and here he was lamenting the abolition of slavery. I wish his views had been more symmetrical and consistent, because then he would have presented a much prettier picture of an intelligent and liberal native aristocrat; but I give his words as they were translated to me.

Whether there was any truth in the charges of injustice and confiscation which he made against the Russian Government, I had no means of judging. In all countries complaints against rulers are made, and are generally stronger when the rulers are of alien race. Certainly, if the inhabitants of the northern side of the chain are in any way oppressed, the oppression must be marvellously concealed, for during the whole time we were in the valleys no Russians did we see, save two young officers who came from

Pätigorsk expressly to join us on an expedition, a Colonel, who happened to be passing through Utkulan, and a poor fellow, clerk to a native chief of the same place. So far as I could judge, the villagers were let alone as much as any men could possibly desire to be, living, I should say, precisely after the fashion of their forefathers, and in nowise hindered from so doing. Taxation seemed to be very light. The Caucasian who complained admitted that all they had to pay was a house-tax, so moderate as not to press hard on any one. They also have to keep the paths in order, but this surely it would be advisable for them to do under any circumstances. As to interference with their religion, I should have great difficulty in believing that anything of the kind is attempted. Each village had its priest, who, we were told, said prayers at certain times. The inhabitants never attended, but of course they could have done so if they had liked. The Greek Church is usually supposed not to seek proselytes, and certainly, if it has any missionaries in the northern valleys, they must surpass even the famous missionaries of the Roman Catholic Church in the skill with which they make themselves like unto the natives.

As to confiscating the property of the chiefs, no doubt, if the Russian authorities are doing such a thing, they are perpetrating a great injustice. It would be as iniquitous as it would be impolitic to take the estates of men not guilty of any offence, and not

disaffected to the Government, but it is hardly necessary to say that the statement of this one man could not for a moment be considered as proving that any such measures were being carried out or contemplated. The questions which arise respecting the tenure of land where the rulers and the ruled are of different races, and have inherited utterly different laws and traditions, are of great difficulty, as has often enough been found in India, and it is quite possible that a Caucasian might regard as confiscation what to a man from the West might seem merely a stringent but necessary law. There was certainly some question pending between the Government and the princes of Urusbieh, as we found when we visited that village; but so far as we could make out, the Government was only enforcing some measure to prevent the unlimited felling of trees which is going on in the few forests now remaining in the Northern Caucasus. To a Caucasian such a proceeding would very likely appear to be confiscation. I have recorded the conversation with the aggrieved man because there was, as it seemed to me, considerable interest in hearing what an intelligent native had to say of the Government under which he lived. As I have already said, I could form no judgment on the justice of his complaints. In some other instances we saw evidence of a certain discontent with the Government, but it would be the height of vanity for a traveller, on the strength of a rapid journey through part of the Caucasus, and of conversations necessarily

conducted through an interpreter, to give an opinion on the difficult questions which must arise between the Russians and the mountain tribes. It should be remembered that at the time of which I am speaking the law of universal military service was not enforced in the Caucasus. Should it be applied there, it is possible that the Caucasians may have very real and grave causes for discontent.

CHAPTER VI.

PASS FROM TCHEGEM TO THE BAKSAN VALLEY.
ALPINE AND CAUCASIAN SCENERY.

Start from Tchegem—Position of a Chief's Guests in the Caucasus—
Character of the Country traversed after leaving the Tchegem Valley
—Comparison between Alpine and Caucasian Scenery—A Farm-
house—Inquisitive Wayfarers—The Top of the Pass—The Koanta
Glen—The Valley of the Baksan—Osrokova—Difficulty of getting
Food and Lodging—Eloquence of the Man of Gebi.

THERE was some faint promise of fine weather the next morning (July 21), and being ready soon after daybreak we said good-bye to the pleasant chiefs of Tchegem, and had to go through the rather delicate business of paying them for their good cheer. The lodging and food provided by the chief in a northern village, are, in accordance with Mohammedan ideas, supposed to be freely given. The chief is a friend and host, not a landlord, and would not think for a moment of demanding money from the man he has entertained, who might go away without paying anything whatever if he were mean enough to do so. I hope I need not say that we never allowed the chiefs to be losers by their good treatment of us, but there was always a

slight hesitation on their part about receiving money. We estimated in each case what we had cost the head of the village, and then proffered him a sum rather above the amount. This offer was usually met by a courteous assurance that no payment was necessary, and that everything had been freely given, not sold. We answered this by a request that, as a favour to ourselves, the money might be taken, and it was then pocketed without more ado. I believe that some present was always expected; in fact, it could hardly be otherwise; for why should these men provide gratuitously for utter strangers? But I am not sure that the chiefs were always best pleased with money, although they took it. Some gift which would have made the transaction seem rather less mercantile would, I think, have gratified them more. Having nothing else, however, money we always gave. After quitting the village our way lay down the Tchehem valley, which is not without a certain beauty, though rather monotonous from that absence of trees which characterizes so much of the Northern Caucasus. Some two or three hours from the village the valley opens into a greater one, and here we struck towards the north-west, our path lying through wild and grand country, very strange to our eyes; on the south, a great wall of limestone cliffs; to the north, vast rolling slopes of grass, and beyond them huge ridges, covered from base to crest by the like unchanging mantle, rising above sombre valleys. Same in colour,

of no great beauty of form, this wilderness of grass-covered slopes is nevertheless of much grandeur, and possesses a stamp and character of its own which make it different altogether from those mountain countries which most Englishmen know. The mind naturally seeks some standard of comparison, and during our journey through the chain we constantly sought to compare what we saw with the Alps, but only to feel more completely the unlikeness of the hills and valleys we were traversing to those where we had wandered so often. The Caucasus indeed is not as Switzerland is. Whether more or less beautiful, it is different from the Alpine chain; as different, if it may be permitted to compare mountains to human beings, as are the Caucasian hunters and shepherds from the peasants of the Valais or the Oberland.

But is it more or less beautiful? Which region is the noblest? Which leaves the deepest impression on the mind? One country, however different from another, must either exceed it or fall below it in beauty, after all; and mountain districts necessarily have much in common which makes a comparison between them possible. Is then the Caucasus on the whole finer than Switzerland, or is it not? Such questions would be naturally put by any one who cared for mountains. Perhaps, before trying to answer, I may be allowed to give an instance showing the difficulty of judging even man's work.

The Venus of Milo has long been admired as one

of the very few works of a good period of Greek art which has come down to us. Critics have examined, discussed, extolled it, explained it to the throng, proved to their own satisfaction the precise position of the missing arms, made it the subject of careful scrutiny and of much disquisition. It might well be thought that it had been fully appreciated, and that the examination of it had been exhaustive.

And what was the fact? When the statue was brought back to its place in the Louvre, after having been concealed during the siege of Paris, it was found that, owing to the clumsiness of the men who set it up on its first arrival in France, the two blocks of marble of which it is composed had not been properly joined, and that consequently it had been thrown out of its proper line, and a cant given to the body above the waist, at variance alike with truth to nature and with the intention of the sculptor who fashioned the work. And this elementary fault had remained undiscovered. Critics had been ready to explain what must have been the position of the lost arms, had observed a slight difference between the two sides of the face, but not one had detected this gross, it might almost be thought, this palpable error. Now when it is found that a coarse mistake of this kind has escaped the observation of those whose faculties were supposed to be the keenest and the most highly trained, that men who were giving opinions on all that is most subtle and delicate in the treatment of a figure, had

failed to see this vital flaw, it is perhaps no unfair inference that critical judgment in matters of beauty is but a poor, weak thing at best, possessing by no means the value usually given to it, and that certainty in deciding on things beautiful is so far from being attainable, even by the most cultivated, that they are liable at any moment to make quite childish blunders. But if there be ground for thinking critical judgment of little worth when the limited and comparatively simple work of men's hands has to be considered, how much weight can be given to it in any attempt to decide on the infinite glories of nature? Is it of much avail to try to rate and define the manifold beauties of mountain, glacier, and valley, and say which of two great regions is the fairest? Is not the task too difficult, perhaps impossible? I believe that the more a man studies nature, the less he will feel inclined to speak dogmatically of the beauty of one country as compared with another. Each may have produced a deep and lasting impression on him, but he cannot mark the points which admiration for them should reach, as an engineer marks the pressure of steam. We are not yet able to appraise beauty.

If, then, I make any attempt shortly to compare the Northern Caucasus with Switzerland, I do so with the feeling that such a comparison would be worth little, even if made by one gifted with rare powers of observation, and that from a mere ordinary traveller its value must be small indeed; but those who are

likely to be most interested in the Caucasus are those who already know and love Switzerland, and they may naturally ask which country is the grander and the more striking; whether, by going to the Caucasus a man sees things beyond aught he can find between Lake Lemman and the Ortler Spitz; mountains more abrupt than the Matterhorn, or more beautiful than the Jungfrau; valleys more varied or impressive than the Saas Thal or the Val d'Anniviers. With a strong sense of the worthlessness of any answer I can give, I will endeavour to reply. Of course it is necessary here, as in other parts of the book, to speak positively, as it would be wearisome to fence every statement with an expression of distrust.

The part of the Caucasus which we were traversing is that in which the highest and noblest peaks rise, and the comparison should be made between the northern side of this portion of the range and Switzerland. The southern side should be contrasted with or likened to the southern valleys of the Alps. With regard then to the northern side of the chain, it may be briefly said that the valley scenery is inferior both in beauty and variety to that of Switzerland, but that, on the other hand, the snow mountains are grander and more striking than those of the Alpine range. The Caucasian valleys indeed are often dull, sometimes exceedingly ugly. A description has already been given of the lower portion of the valley of the Tcherek, and of the vale of Bezingi. Scarcely more

pleasing to the eye than either of these is the country through which for a considerable distance the Baksan flows, and the valley of the Kuban below Utchkulan is only remarkable for its size. There is generally great monotony of colour, sometimes poverty of form; but it is the want of forests which most dulls the Northern Caucasus. There are pine woods, it is true, but they are usually just under the mountains, and are few and small for so mighty a hill country. The great valleys and high ridges are often bare of trees, and it is not till a man has travelled in a land thus naked that he knows how much of the beauty of the mountain region below glacier and snow is due to the woodland, or how deadening to hill and dale the absence of it may be. Too often no forests clothe the sides of those great, blank ridges, and if any one would realise what this vacancy is, let him try to conceive what the fairest Swiss valley would be without those pines which come down to the water's edge and stretch far up on distant slopes, which spring from narrow ledges, crown the brows of great crags, and find holding ground even on the boulders which have rolled down from above, being, indeed, a part so essential of mountain beauty that scarcely an Alpine scene can be called to memory without the recollection of those forests which girdle the everlasting hills.

In Caucasian valleys, often very impressive, but generally grim, the traveller, generally speaking, does not find rock, wood, and stream yielding a series of

entrancing pictures, as in the more favoured Swiss vales. The Caucasian scenery is less varied and more harsh, though owing to the vast scale on which the country is moulded it is sometimes of impressive grandeur. There is nothing in Switzerland so striking as Tchegegem. In its upper part the valley of the Tcherék is more imposing than any in the Alps; but in colour, in softness, in varied beauty, in those things which men love, and come back year after year to gaze on, the valleys of the Northern Caucasus are inferior to those of Switzerland, and would not, I believe, if they were equally easy to reach, be cared for as the latter are.

As to the southern side of the chain, it is probably otherwise. I saw so little of it that I cannot speak with any authority, but, from what I did look on, I should say that even the Italian valleys of the Alps are not of such prodigal and gorgeous richness as some parts of the South Caucasus. Those who have been in Suenetia describe it as a paradise—inhabited unfortunately by demons, but that is nought to the present purpose; and in the western province of Abkhasia I saw, at the end of our journey, scenes of beauty surpassing to my mind anything I had ever before beheld. The wonderful vegetation of the southern slopes is beyond that of the Italian side of the Alps, and generally nature seems to have worked in a larger and grander fashion. I believe that future travellers will say that the valleys of Suenetia and

Abkhasia transcend even those on the southern side of Monte Rosa.

The huge snow-peaks which rise between these luxuriant slopes and the stern northern country, are nobler than those of the Alps. In the first place they are greater, and their size is made appreciable by the wonderful steepness, which is the main characteristic of the chain. In this they surpass the Alps. It is no exaggeration to say that a mountain or ridge which would seem specially precipitous in Switzerland would be nothing out of the common in the Caucasus. There is an escarped look about the vast sides of these Eastern heights, and of the curtains connecting them, which adds greatly to their apparent size, and tells of abrupt cliffs which will be very terrible to the climber when it is sought to set foot on Caucasian crests. It is true that the slopes of Elbruz, the highest mountain in the chain, are gentle and gradual, but of no other great peak in the Western Caucasus can this, I believe, be said. During the time we were in the country we saw a way up one for certain and up two others possibly. The first was the mountain just named, which we ascended; the other two were Tau Tetnuld and Tung-sorun, which stands at the head of the Urusbieh valley. Very likely, with time and trouble, paths would be found to many of the summits, but with such inspection as we were able to give we could see no way up the precipitous and jagged cliffs of the high mountains. What is most remarkable in Caucasian

peaks, then, is their sheer rise. Now it is not by any means desirable that great heights should be looked at only with a climber's eyes, and that nothing should be thought magnificent which is not seemingly impossible; but nevertheless it is generally true that no mountains produce so great an effect on men as those which are apparently inaccessible, those of which the mighty precipices seem to defy any efforts human beings can make to reach the unassailable crests. This no doubt is due in part to the great boldness of form which marks such mountains, and to their absolute difference from anything seen in lowlands; but it is also due in part, perhaps, to this appearance of impregnability. The ordinary spectator may not keenly scrutinize the inclination of cliffs and the texture of rocks to see whether there is any possible line by which the highest point can be gained; but nevertheless he is deeply impressed by that which is apparently beyond the reach of the best of his fellows, by those high places which look as if they must be for ever virgin to man's tread. Who that cares for mountains can forget how he has admired and wondered at those which were seemingly beyond all human effort? Now, as I have said, the peaks of the Caucasus are far more abrupt than those of Switzerland. Their sides are steeper, and their crests are more keen. In appearance of inaccessibility and in boldness of form they are beyond the Alps, and probably, when they are better known, they will be thought grander and more majestic than

the Alps, both by those who love to scale mountains and by those who are well content with mountain beauty as seen from below.

Whether they are really impossible of ascent or not, I cannot attempt to decide. Many an Alpine peak, the regular tariff price of which is now, so to speak, the badge of its subjugation, was at one time deemed inaccessible, and it is almost a matter of faith with some of the Alpine Club that a way is to be found to the summit of every mountain, if only men will seek long and strive hard. Others will discover whether the Caucasus justifies this belief, but it may safely be predicted that the high peaks of the chain will not be won without very great effort, and the exercise of the highest mountaineering skill.

I must now return to the grass slopes where I left my companions to give this brief and imperfect sketch of Caucasian as contrasted with Alpine scenery. Our way lay over a great rolling down, which formed the base of the huge valley we had entered from that of Tchegem. It was a wild, sad place, but one thing redeemed the severity of the view. There were cattle grazing on some of the hill-sides, and this told of peaceful human occupation and of settled life in this seeming wilderness. Soon there was still better evidence of this, for we came to a farmhouse whence issued the inhabitants, after we had as usual battled with jackal-like dogs. I am bound to say that, although Mohammedans, they were as dirty as dustmen.

There was a tall fellow, stately in spite of his filthy rags, the head of the family, and with him were a mob of children, a wife or so, and two or three lusty young men. All stared at us as though we had dropped from the clouds, and asked questions with true Caucasian curiosity; but they were kindly people, if inquisitive, bringing sour milk and curds in abundance, and not, I think, expecting any payment, though of course something was given them. They wished us a good journey with much cordiality, and a dog would certainly have got hold of my leg as I was waving farewell, had not an interposition of providence in the shape of a kick from one of our horses sent the brute howling away. I say one of our horses, for though we ourselves were foot travellers all through the journey, we had with us at this time two baggage animals, which, with a couple of men to drive them, we had hired at Kunim. After a slight attempt to cheat us—a proceeding which often seems an essential preliminary to a good understanding between employer and employed—the men had become very fair servants, one of them afterwards proving quite devoted, for he informed us later on in our journey, that having taken a fancy to us, he would stay with us for any wages we pleased to give him; strange to say, he meant it. On this day, however, though bent on making a long stage, they were, unfortunately for us, in a very conversational mood, and, as we met several wayfarers, we were much delayed by that inveterate talkativeness

in which I verily believe a Caucasian would beat a hair-dresser or a monthly nurse. The dialogue repeated with every fresh traveller ran something in this fashion:—

The Traveller.—Good morning. All greetings to you. Who are these with you?

One of our Men.—They are strangers; very honourable persons of good degree, travelling under the protection of the Russians.

The Traveller.—Why do they go on foot?

Our Man.—They are strangers, and it so pleases them. It is the way of their country. They are rich men, and could have horses in plenty if they would, but they will not.

The Traveller.—That is indeed curious. Where are they going?

Our Man.—To Urusbieh.

The Traveller.—What do they want there?

Our Man.—I do not know.

The Traveller.—It is most curious they should go on foot!

Our Man.—It is in truth. They could well afford to ride if they pleased, but you see they are strangers, and in their country.

Paul (interposing with fury).—Do you think the gentlemen have nothing to do but to stand here and listen to you prating with any one you meet? Go on, I say, and do the work you are paid for, you lazy vagabonds.

Both our Men together.—Lazy vagabonds! We are as good men as you, and indeed much better than you (here a violent personal altercation lasting some time).

With episodes of this kind, we trudged over the long and dull way to the top of the grass pass we had to cross, and got to the col in fair time in spite of the pauses for talk. The Caucasians, though usually very fond of short halts on a march, can, if they please, make long stages, and seem to care very little when they eat, going for six or seven hours without any apparent necessity for food. I believe that, if required, they could walk all day without a meal, and suffer little from the fasting. In this respect they present a favourable contrast to Swiss guides, the strongest of whom can rarely go for more than five hours without meat and drink, and who frequently stop at shorter intervals. On this occasion our horse-drivers were very reluctant to let us halt for food on the top of the pass, though it was seven good hours since we had left Tchegeg, and pointed out to us, when told to pull up, that we had already several times rebuked them for stopping. We replied that, so far as we knew, bread was a necessity for man, but that chatter was not; but we had no opportunity of learning what their views were on this point, for the discussion here diverged into two separate channels. Paul, by a direct *argumentum ad hominem*, engaged each of the horse-drivers in a discussion as to his own personal

merits and those of some of his relations. We got involved in a debate less acrid, but almost equally animated. Moore, much struck by the conduct of the Caucasians, recurred to his favourite thesis that daily eating was a bad habit which could be almost got rid of by resolution and perseverance. These men, he said, can do without food for eight or nine hours; thence it would be easy to get to ten or twelve, then by degrees to twenty-four, and so on until a bi-weekly dinner was all that was required to sustain human energy. We contested this, declaring that we wanted to dine then, should want to sup that night, and that we had every reason to suppose that these wants would recur with distressing regularity. The discussion lasted some time, and Moore, I think, got the best of the argument; but, in justice to ourselves, I must say that we carried out our views in practice, and that he did not. I ought to add, however, that his power of going without food for long periods is considerable, and only matched by a corresponding ability for devouring it when others set him a good example. The col we had reached was marked by a stone pillar, and it would therefore seem that the pass is one of some importance. The country during the latter part of the ascent had been very dull, but from the 'Tau,' as the Caucasians call the top of either pass or mountain, the view to the north-west was somewhat impressive, commanding part of the great valley of the Baksan, which, softened by distance, and seen from

above, did not appear to be without beauty, though it was a dismal place enough when entered. That rain had fallen during the morning it is hardly necessary to say, but fortunately there was no mist, so that we could see the green country in front of us, though none of the high mountains were visible. In descending we wound round a concave hill-side, and entered a pretty little glen which led to a secluded valley of great beauty, to all seeming an utter solitude. It was narrow, with lofty sides, and in the upper part the splendid grass-slopes were, save in their steepness, like those of an English park, a small forest being placed just where the most cunning landscape-gardener would have desired it. It was a lovely vale with the true Caucasian loneliness, but without the Caucasian dulness.

The Koanta stream which comes down this glen flows into the Baksan, and a short walk brought us to the great valley through which the course of that river lies. It would not be easy in a mountain country to find anything less interesting than this vast trough. It has a wide, nearly level floor of grass-land; sides, perhaps of some height, but dwarfed by the great width of the floor, and without beauty or variety of form. With a lowering sky giving promise of a coming tempest, the scene was most dreary, and the more depressing to us that we were quite uncertain which way to go, or whether we should find any shelter from the storm. We had been told that there

was a village where we could pass the night, but now our men did not seem to know whether it was up stream or down stream of us, and could do nothing but make foolish and contradictory suggestions. Fortunately, Moore had with his usual prevision made careful enquiries at Tchegem, and from what he had learnt there, and from a minute observation of the country we had passed through, he was able to lead the Caucasians in their own land, thinking quite rightly that the village of Osrokova, which we were seeking, was probably below the point where we had struck the valley. Certainty, however, on this point was impossible until we could actually see the village, although there was all possible certainty as to a vile night. Osrokova was therefore looked for with a perhaps pardonable anxiety.

It was but a short journey to it. Our way lay, first over dull grass plains, and then along the gently sloping southern side of the valley, here marked by a series of small rounded projections. While passing along them we could observe that the meadows in the plain below were watered by an elaborate system of irrigation, a thing hardly to be expected in a region with so very thin a population. Indeed, it was a matter of some wonder where the people could be who thus carefully cultivated the land, and the wonder was hardly lessened when we reached Osrokova, a small, very miserable village, placed some distance up the southern slope of the valley at the mouth of a little

glen, of which the stream, indescribably filthy from receiving every kind of refuse, flowed sluggishly past the wretched-looking houses. These were even ruder than those generally found in the country, and the inhabitants were, most of them, squalid dirty creatures, though, as is always the case in the north-western Caucasus, there were some handsome, well-dressed fellows amongst them. Immediately on our arrival a crowd gathered round us, headed by the village priest, who seemed privileged to be the most inquisitive of the community, and, according to Caucasian custom, everybody talked at once, and stared as though we were caged beasts. To this we were getting accustomed, but in spite of Moore's precepts we had not yet got accustomed to going without food, and we much desired to find cover as the storm was beginning. We were therefore something dismayed to discover that the villagers were not apparently inclined to give us any aid whatever. Paul read the Russian letter, and said that we were not small people, and that it would be a serious matter if we were not well treated; but there was no chief, nobody whose duty it was to receive strangers; and as therefore not a man in the crowd felt any individual responsibility, Paul's statement fell, I am sorry to say, a little flat, and we might have had some difficulty in getting what we wanted, had there not been in the throng that never-failing visitor to a Caucasian village, one of the energetic men of Gebi. Now I hope I made it clear in my description of that

place that the inhabitants have no dislike to the sound of their own voices, and this time the man of Gebi certainly did, if the expression may be allowed, improve the occasion, speaking to those around him to this effect:—‘ Now look you, these are considerable men. I know all about them, for I have friends all over the country, and hear of everything that goes on. These travellers are much thought of, and are under the special protection of the Russians, so you will do well to treat them with respect. That one (pointing to Moore) is the chief, a man of much dignity. These two (Walker and myself), are his subordinates; and that tall, comely one (pointing to Gardiner, who was mending a rent in his trousers), is also a chief of some importance. Treat them well, I advise you, for they are worthy of it. Moreover,’ added the man of Gebi, ‘ they will pay for all they get.’

Now this exhortation, and more especially the concluding sentence of it, told on the villagers, and when it was translated to us we felt warmly towards the man of Gebi, who acted in a purely impartial spirit, seeing that he could not be called on to run any risk himself. The throng was so far impressed by what he said that, on the Russian letter being again read, a house was found for us, and one bold speculator rushed off to his dwelling, returning with a basket of eggs. Payment being immediate, to his great delight, he started at once to spread the news on Osrokova Change that the price quoted for eggs was a copeck apiece or

about three for a penny, which was cheap enough no doubt, but perhaps eight or nine times what they were worth in the village. The result was wonderful. Men who the moment before had declared that they had nothing to give us, suddenly remembered that their hens had been laying that day, and eggs enough came in to make a whole boarding-school bilious. Thirty ahead or so seemed to be our estimated consumption, it being apparently thought that righteous men who paid cash on delivery must be enormous eaters. It was long before we got rid of the noisy crowd, but they went at last, and we listened in peace to the beating of a furious storm, not an unpleasant sound for us now that we had a roof over our heads; but it would have been a sorry night on the hill-side.

CHAPTER VII.

URUSBIEH.

Walk up the Valley of the Baksan—Heavy Rain—Sudden Change—A cordial Chief—Arrival at Urusbieh—Well-ventilated House—The meek Chief of the Village—His care for his guests—The elder and greater brother—Caucasian Etiquette—A substantial Feast—Diet and Cookery of the Caucasians of the North-West—Ascent of a hillock behind Urusbieh—Valleys of the Adul-Su and Kwirik—Absence of the Princes of Urusbieh—Ismail's Son and Heir—Excitement of the villagers on seeing a pencil used—The Hunter, Sotaf Achia—Ascent of Tau Sultra—Achia's dread of snow—View from the summit of Tau Sultra—Elbruz—Usch-Ba, the double-crested Matterhorn—Preposterous story invented by the Suenetians—Return to Urusbieh—Rejoicings there on account of a wedding.

HEAVY rain was still falling when the day broke on July 22, but a walk under any downpour was far better than a sojourn in filthy Osrokova; so we started early, and trudged up the dull valley on which the very floodgates of heaven seemed to be opened. It was not a pleasant morning certainly, with that familiar but ever-detestable infliction of wet, perhaps more teasing among the hills than anywhere else, for few things are more tiresome than a walk through mountain country in thoroughly bad weather. The rain, driven by the wind, finds chinks and weak places

in the most cunningly contrived armour of mackintosh, and gets through in wicked little streams, making a man feel as though snails were crawling over him. Around are gloom and vapour ; overhead is a thick pall of mist ; the hill-sides are wrapt in the densest clouds ; all that is visible in the valley is made indistinct and blurred ; a melancholy greyness is everywhere. Assuredly, if mountain regions are pleasant beyond all others in fine weather, none are so dolesome in bad.

Some signs of a prosperity beyond that of other places we had visited in the Northern Caucasus we could see as we walked along the soaked meadows. The road was suited for carts, and after we had gone some way we came to a perfect caravan of these on their way up the valley. They were two-wheeled, of very rough make, and drawn by oxen. At the time we overtook them the drivers were occupied in the not very easy task of getting cattle and carts over a frail bridge which crossed the turbid Baksan. Seeing that the Caucasians make roads which are, all things considered, very good, it is strange how little pains they give themselves about bridges. Frequently the streams have to be forded, and when there are bridges they are usually but rickety constructions, labour on them being evidently grudged ; a thing not easy to understand, in a country where so much trouble is taken with the roads.

It had seemed when we started as though the bad weather must last all day at least, but after a

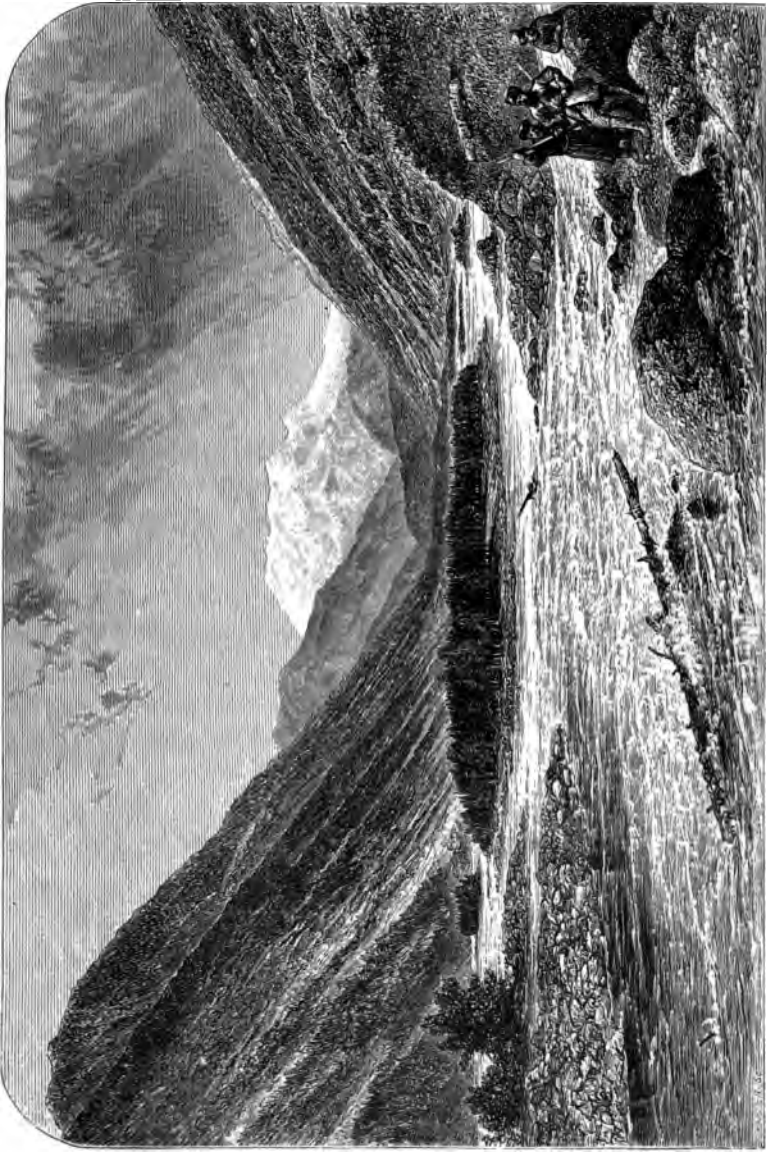
long downfall there came in the afternoon one of those rapid changes which are sometimes seen in a mountain land. The rain got lighter and then ceased, the mist overhead opened, and blue sky appeared. The clouds began to rise on the hill-sides, and within half an hour of the time when we had been in deepest gloom the sun was shining brightly, the ridges on either side were clear, and we could see a great mountain at the head of the valley afar off. It was a wonderfully quick passage from foul to fair. I never remember seeing the mists quit the hills in so short a space. Strange to say, the fine weather which came thus suddenly was no mere passing gleam, but lasted steadily for eight days. The Caucasus seems to have atmospheric laws of its own.

The valley of the Baksan improves much as its upper part is reached and Urusbieh approached. The hills on each side are bolder, the base is narrower, while at the head is seen the mighty mass of the great mountain Tungsorun. There are trees on the slopes; not as yet in large forests, but enough nevertheless to be very grateful to the eyes of men weary of a monotony of grass wilderness. This improvement in the country, joined to the sunshine, made us hope for pleasant days at Urusbieh, and we went on our way, if not rejoicing, at all events in a fair state of cheerfulness, while we steamed like apple-dumplings under the strong sun. The warmth was grateful, but being rough dried was a disagreeable process notwith-

standing. When near the village we met a chief with his attendant trotting down the valley. He was extremely cordial, after the fashion of the genial people who dwell by the Upper Baksan, shook hands, and insisted on addressing, or rather on attempting to address, us in Russian, without the slightest advantage to us, it being no more intelligible to us than his own tongue, but with much ill-usage, I fear, of the Russian language, which according to Paul he mangled frightfully. If his grammar was bad, his manners were good, and gave a pleasing augury of the people amongst whom we were going, which, unlike most pleasing auguries, came true. Not very long after we had met this chief we sighted Urusbieh, which is prettily placed on the slopes on the western side of the valley. Behind is a glen from which a powerful stream flows through the village down to the Baksan, and on the opposite side of the valley, another glen—a very noble one, as we afterwards discovered—opens out the south. The whole scene under that bright sun seemed to us very pleasing, but the beauty of hill and dale is, like other beauty, often relative. When Mr. Freshfield and his companions arrived at Urusbieh in 1868, the scenery round the place struck them as being dull, if not ugly; while to us, as we neared the village, the valley seemed very fair to look on, but then the earlier travellers came fresh from beautiful Suenetia, which must surely be one of the loveliest countries in the world; while our wanderings had been through the

stern and often sombre valleys of the north, so that what appeared to us varied and pretty had seemed to them harsh and colourless.

The floor of the valley about Urusbieh is mainly flat, and in parts the Baksan spreads over a considerable portion of it. The sides rise boldly, and the vale is fitly dominated by the huge Tungsorun, a mountain not possessing the usual Caucasian sharpness of form, but imposing from its vastness. Our way lay on the eastern side of the stream until we were just opposite the village, where a bridge, rather better made than usual, crosses the river. The engraving on the opposite page of the valley of the Upper Baksan and of Tungsorun, is from a photograph taken from the Urusbieh end of this bridge. Crossing its exceptionally firm planks we marched up to the houses, and found a group of young men, the youthful aristocracy of the place, as we afterwards discovered, engaged in that conversation which seems to be the principal object of a well-to-do Caucasian life. They looked at us at first with wonder and a little distrust, but Paul having explained who we were and read the Russian letter, two of them stepped forward, bade us welcome, and pointed out a house close by, which they said we might occupy, and we accordingly entered it. Now it was a very good house, just built, and one of the best in the village, but nevertheless we felt, like the Irishman in the sedan-chair, that, barring the dignity of the thing, we were not particularly well off, for the



dwelling, like many in more civilised countries, owed considerable discomfort to the ambition of the builder. The mansion was meant to have the very unusual luxury of glass windows, for which neat frames had been fitted. But then unfortunately the glass was wanting, and through large openings the wind made merry, searching every corner. I think that most travellers will agree with me that a night in the open is often better than a night in a house with large gaps in the walls making so many cold blasts on the sleepers; so we were rather unhappy in our grandeur, as people often are, but all was speedily put to rights by the appearance of the chief, who had been fetched by one of the group we had found discoursing when we entered the village, and who now came with all haste to receive the strangers. He was a very young man of meek bearing, and, as it seemed to me, rather frightened at his own position; but we looked on him with favour, for he told us that we were not to stop in the aerated house, as he had caused other lodging to be got ready for us, having been warned of our coming by the inestimable governer of Vladikafkaz, who had sent a message to Urusbieh, as he had done to Tchegem. We followed the chief, and a crowd which had now gathered followed us to a house about a hundred paces from that we had first entered, and the meek head-man duly installed us. The crowd of course came in after us, and all the best places for observation were taken at once, the curiosity of the men of

Urusbieh being quite as ardent and insatiable as that of other Caucasians.

We had not yet lodged on the northern side of the chain in a house so good as that which we now occupied. It had two rooms, in the better of which a considerable portion of the floor was covered by a low platform—it could hardly be called a divan—of planks, very much better for sleeping on than the cold ground. There were also in this well-found dwelling a huge bedstead big enough to hold three—a piece of furniture no doubt very useful in a Mohammedan *ménage*—a great cooking-pot, a three-branched iron candlestick, and a small table, so that we found ourselves in more luxury than is perhaps good for travellers in a wild country, though I cannot say that any reflection on this score caused us uneasiness at the time. The mild chief was urbanity itself, taking such trouble to dispense the tea when it arrived that it pained us to see him, and we implored him to sit down and have some with us. Here, however, we unwittingly raised a delicate point of Caucasian etiquette. There was a whispered conversation between Paul and the chief of such length as made it clear that some awkward question had arisen. Hoping that no solecism on our part had annoyed our attentive host, we waited rather impatiently until Paul came and told us that the chief would be delighted to sit and drink with us, but that there was in the room his elder brother, a much greater man than he, *son plus grand frere*, as Paul called him,

and that, without a terrible breach of family manners, the chief could not sit down or take food or drink until after the greater brother had been asked to seat himself and break bread. This greater brother was a handsome, well-dressed young fellow, whom we had noticed on entering the village prominent in the group of talkers. He joined us now cordially enough, and had some tea and cakes, to which he was accustomed, also a cigar, to which he was not accustomed, and he smoked it, I think, with no small discomfort, but was immensely pleased with it nevertheless, as being something unusual and a tribute to his position. After he had been seated, and his tea given to him, the chief sat down below him.

Now after this observance of a severe etiquette, it astonished us not a little, later in the evening, to see the elder brother sit down and play cards with his own servant, and have apparently a very animated and interesting game with him. It seemed a funny contrast certainly, that where social rules were so strict that a younger brother would not sit down before an elder, an aristocrat could play cards with his servant without seemingly doing anything in the least derogatory to his dignity; but so it was. Manners are, I suppose, in all countries a puzzle to strangers.

The ideas of the young chief as to hospitality were certainly large. After the usual tea and cakes came a considerable quantity of excellent mutton, which we imagined to be dinner, but which proved to be only a

preliminary morsel intended to prepare the guests for a mass of boiled meat covering a table which appeared afterwards. This remarkable whet to the appetite deserved notice, as I think that the practice of giving something of the same kind to guests obtained once in England, when what we should now consider as very substantial food was served as a forerunner to the feast which came an hour or so later. Unless marked by some peculiarity of this kind, a traveller's meals, though of considerable consequence to himself, are of the smallest possible interest to readers, and writers on Alpine exploration have been accused of relating with unnecessary unction how they ate three times a day, forgetting that the practice is far from uncommon. Even a very slight sketch of the people of the north-western Caucasus would, however, be imperfect without some account of their cookery, and it may not be amiss to take this opportunity of telling how the Caucasians prepare their food. Happily the subject admits of very brief treatment.

The bread all through the country is baked in large round flat loaves, made from barley or wheat meal, into which all the husk is apparently ground. The loaves or cakes are, however, essentially brown bread, quite different from the black bread of the Alps, and, so far as taste is concerned, are usually excellent, though unfortunately they are exceedingly indigestible, being hardly ever baked through, and having almost always a stratum of dough in the

middle ; but the traveller in a wild country must not expect to find everything exactly according to his wants, and if the bread is pleasant to eat he can hardly hope that it will be wholesome too. Like other indigestible kinds of food, it will not disagree with a man if he eats it only when decidedly hungry, and then only eats a little. There is a better kind of bread made from a selected and sifted flour, and baked with care, which is as good as anything that can be desired, but this being for native means very dear, is rarely made, and is offered only as a special favour. The meat which the traveller obtains during the summer is invariably mutton. Seeing that there were large herds of cattle, I wondered at this in my stupidity, and asked one of the chiefs at Urusbieh why it was that the people always killed sheep and never oxen, whereupon he told me in answer what a very moderate amount of ingenuity would have enabled me to guess. Said he :—‘ If a man were to kill an ox in the summer, a good deal of the flesh would be bad before he and his family could eat it, but this of course would not be the case with a sheep, which is so much smaller. In the winter, on the contrary, the flesh of an ox will keep long enough for a family to eat it all, and therefore we eat mutton in the summer and beef in the winter.’ As has been said, this answer might have been guessed, but nevertheless it was interesting, as showing the extremely simple and patriarchal life of these people. It did not seem to strike the chief that

a man might sell to his neighbour a part of the ox he killed. Each family lives apparently on its own flock and herd. The mutton is very good. The sheep are larger than the Welsh, though considerably under the size of the ordinary English animal. They have short curly wool, frequently black or grey, and are of the breed which furnishes the skins largely sold in England as cheap Astrakhan. The Caucasians are not at all particular about hanging their meat, but after killing a sheep usually skin it and cut it up at once with wonderful quickness, and then cook it immediately. There is an old saying to the effect that flesh cooked while still warm will be found quite tender, and this our experience altogether confirmed, for we found that mutton which had been thus rapidly dealt with was never tough. The native way of cooking was nearly always to boil. At Urusbieh there was an enlightened cook (probably a princess) who was acquainted with a form of pie, and could even make *rissoles*, but with this exception we found that the natives when in the villages never prepared their meat in any other way than by boiling it. They made excellent broth from the water in which it was boiled, which they were given to flavouring with a very strong kind of onion. As a favour to us they roasted meat for us, and when they were not able on an expedition to take one of their great cooking-pots with them, they were very clever at broiling over a wood fire, but in the villages, when left to their own ways,

they invariably boiled their meat, with the one exception of the Urusbieh cook I have mentioned.

Meat, brown bread, and a kind of cheese, are the staple of Caucasian diet, the first being the food of which they consume the most, and it is probably owing to the preponderance of flesh in their fare that they owe the slim supple figures on which the native dress sits so well. I was struck at first by the remarkable absence of fat men, but when I became acquainted with the Caucasian way of living my wonder ceased. Of course there are some things besides bread and meat. Poultry, and its necessary consequence eggs, are usually to be found in the villages, and are, as need hardly be said, eaten by the natives; but their main reliance is on mutton in the summer and beef in the winter. Potatoes we found grown in small quantities near Urusbieh. Of sweet food there seems to be none whatever. The rich men keep a small quantity of sugar for their great delicacy, tea, but with this exception nothing sweet seems ever to be taken.

Alcoholic drinks of any kind are all but absolutely unknown. At Urusbieh there was some stuff called beer, but it was a horribly acid decoction, having no taste of beer in it, and containing, as it seemed to me, no alcohol whatever. At Utchkulan the chief gave us, as a special favour, a beer rather better than this, and it may possibly have contained some tiny percentage of alcohol; but, with these two exceptions, we never found in the northern Caucasus

a drink which either was, or was supposed to be, in the slightest degree alcoholic; and I believe that in most of the villages a great majority of the inhabitants are as completely unacquainted with the taste of anything spirituous as Englishmen are with bang. The Caucasians obey the precepts of the Prophet in this respect, whether from religious feeling, or because what is forbidden is also unattainable, we had no means of discovering. The universal drink in the northern valleys is sour milk, mixed with water. Fresh milk the natives rarely touch, their custom being to curdle it with rennet, and when the curds are acid to add water to them, stirring the mixture till it is quite fluid. The thin drink thus produced is commonly kept in skins, like wine, and is taken by the Caucasians at all their meals. Decidedly nasty it seems at first, but after a time there comes a liking for it, and certainly we all ended by becoming excessively fond of what we began by thinking almost nauseous. I have never known any drink so good as this for quenching that feverish thirst which comes of a hard walk on a hot day. So far as we could ascertain, it is exceedingly wholesome, being far more digestible than fresh milk, and as it is very easy to make I would suggest taking it in hot weather to those who have discovered that, where long-sustained physical effort has to be made, non-alcoholic drinks are the best. *Lait Aigre*, which is drunk in some parts of the *Valais*, is almost the same as the Caucasian drink.

A coarse kind of white cheese, something between yellow and cream cheese in consistency, is largely made. It has little flavour, good or bad, and has to be eaten by strangers with caution, as it is very apt to disagree with those who are not accustomed to it. To eat some of this cheese with the underbaked part of one of the brown loaves, is no bad test of a traveller's digestion. He may be ill afterwards; but if he is not, he may rest assured that few things will come amiss to him.

It will be seen then that sugar and alcohol, two things usually found essential by civilised men, form no part of the diet of the Caucasians, and excellent well they seem to thrive without them. Very fine men they certainly are; to all appearance healthy, and, though exceedingly lazy, capable of severe and prolonged labour when they think fit to exert themselves. I should add that they are very moderate eaters—nothing astonished them more than our appetites—and that, though assuredly far removed from savages, they seem to have preserved some of the savage's power of going without food. Of this we saw a remarkable instance at the end of our journey.

The traveller, it will have been seen, fares well in a Caucasian village. Brown bread, excellent mutton, fowls and eggs sometimes, and frequent tea and cakes, are as good food as man can desire, and better than he has any right to expect among a primitive people. Considerable difficulty occurs, however, when, either

for a mountain expedition or for a journey across country where there are no villages, a stock of provisions sufficient to last two or three days is required. Owing to the dawdling and indolent habits of the natives, it is excessively hard to get them to prepare the necessary amount of food, especially to bake bread enough. Everything is promised, and then at the time when all ought to be ready, a quarter or a third of the necessary quantity is forthcoming. A good deal of persuasion and a little bullying usually get what is wanted at last, but it is tiresome work.

Next morning's sun shone brightly on Urusbieh, and we ascended during the forenoon a hillock behind the village, whence we looked into the valley of the Adul-Su, which opens opposite Urusbieh to the south-east. Two bold snow-peaks rise on the western side of this valley, and at its head is a lofty ridge with the escarped look so common in the Caucasus. On the northern, or, to be quite accurate, the north-western side of the Baksan valley, two glens unite a little way above Urusbieh. One leads to the glacier at the foot of a mountain called Tau Sultra, the other is the narrow ending of the valley of the Kwirik, through which we subsequently passed on our way to Utchkulan. It will be seen then that Urusbieh stands at the place where two considerable valleys open into that of the Baksan. Of these the Kwirik vale is dull and bleak, but the Adul-Su is of great beauty, and there is still left in it a large forest, where, alas, the villagers

are making sad havoc. Which was the forest belonging to Prince Ismail, and whether he was threatened with confiscation of it, or only with some limitation of the right of felling, we could not discover; but certain it is that he and his two brothers were, at the time of our arrival, away from Urusbieh on business of importance relating to their property. One of the brothers we afterwards saw, but Ismail did not return during our stay, and we were not able therefore to make acquaintance with the principal man of Urusbieh, who had given so genial a welcome to Mr. Freshfield and his companions in 1868. The chief who entertained us was related to Ismail, but his family was of less degree.

We did not, as has been said, succeed in discovering what was the question which had arisen between the Russian authorities and the princes of Urusbieh, though we learnt that the matter was a very serious one for them. Not knowing anything of the case, therefore, it would be a piece of wanton impertinence on my part to impute anything like unjust dealing to the Russians; but recollecting the hospitality shown to the English travellers in 1868 by Ismail and his brothers, and having heard much about them in their village, it may be permissible to express a hope that no harsh measures have been used towards men so kindly, so liberal, and so much respected by all around them as the princes of Urusbieh.

One representative of the principal family there

was in the place—a charming youngster, some fifteen or sixteen years old, eldest son and heir of Ismail. It was amusing, and at the same time very pleasing, to see how clearly the boy felt that in his father's absence it was his duty to pay every possible attention to strangers, who, had Ismail been at home, would probably have been his guests. 'Sir,' said he once to Moore when the latter was speaking of the journey from Urusbieh to Utchkulan, 'if my father had been here, not only would he have deemed himself honoured by receiving you in his house, but he would have accompanied you to Utchkulan.' Perhaps he was a little overpledging the paternal goodwill. The kindest host could hardly be expected to follow his guest on a three days' journey, but the speech, if marked by boyish exaggeration, came from real warmth of feeling, and from a graceful zeal for the honour of his house. The lad had received some education at a Russian school, and, as was natural, sought a little to imitate the conquering race in dress and manner, but much that was good in the native character remained, and he was an admirable specimen of the people of Urusbieh, the most intelligent and the most kindly of the inhabitants of the north-western Caucasus.

After the exceedingly moderate labour of ascending and descending the hillock, we gave up the rest of the day to that basking indolence which is so pleasant when the sun shines at last after many days of heavy rain. Very agreeable was this mood of ours to the natives.

Urusbieh is occasionally visited by Russians, and is only two days' journey from Pätigorsk, a fashionable watering-place; but the villagers were just as curious as those who dwelt in more secluded valleys, and our idleness gave the men of Urusbieh a good opportunity for prolonged observation. One instance will show how intensely inquisitive they were. In all the villages writing is known, and at Urusbieh several of the leading men wrote quickly and easily. On this afternoon the chief of the village was busy writing letters in the house we occupied, when I sat down on a bench outside to scribble some pencil notes. Men gathered round me at once, and those who were observing Gardiner and Walker in the house, hearing of what was going on, came out immediately. In Patagonia the natives could not have been more wonderingly inquisitive. One man, under pretence of holding down the page, sat down by my side, and nearly got his head between me and the note-book. Two more leant on my shoulder, and the rest pressed me so closely that I had at last to give up writing and go away, whereupon they discussed the matter amongst each other for an hour or so; and this with one of their own people writing letters four yards off. It is possible that the pencil was a novelty, but truly they are a strange race. From the hillock we had ascended we had seen towards the north a minor peak, from the crest of which it seemed likely that we should get an extensive view of the main chain, and a near look at Elbruz. To

ascending this peak therefore, we determined to give up the next day. We had not the slightest doubt that we could find out the way for ourselves; but the chief, discovering what we intended doing, insisted, with the somewhat onerous politeness which has been before described, on sending a man with us, and told off for this purpose the hunter Sotaef Achia. Now Achia deserves a word.

He is the great hunter of Urusbieh, and probably possesses a better knowledge of the surrounding glens and ridges than any other man in the village. Of what lies beyond the snow-line he knows very little; but ignorance in this respect is common to all Caucasians, who rarely set foot on the snow save when they have to cross a pass. The game of the country, far less hunted than that of Switzerland, is not nearly so shy, and has not to be followed into such remote sanctuaries as those which the Swiss chamois-hunter is obliged to invade. Great mountaineering skill is therefore not required for following game in the Caucasus. What the hunter there must possess—in addition, of course, to the power of holding his gun straight, which all hunters must possess—are a thorough knowledge of the lower slopes of the mountains, a great capacity for quick hill-walking, and almost literally the eye of a hawk. Now these qualifications Achia had in a high degree. That he knew the country well, I have said; what his powers of walking were we soon discovered, as Mr. Freshfield did in 1868. Spare,

sinewy, strong, his action was so easy that he seemed to be going quite leisurely along the hill-side, when his real pace was such as to make it difficult for a man of average power to keep up with him ; and he could, if necessary, maintain this rate of going for the whole of a long expedition. His eyesight was extraordinary. I saw him discover a bouquetin among rocks of a colour very like its own, so far off that when he subsequently reached the place himself several of our party could not see him, in spite of the advantage which his dark dress gave them ; and subsequently he saw us on Elbruz at a distance which I should have thought quite beyond the range of the naked eye. He ascended the eastern peaks of that mountain in 1868 with Mr. Freshfield and his companions, and acquired on that occasion a holy horror of snow ; for, wearing no spectacles, he suffered not a little from snow-blindness after the ascent. For high mountain work, indeed, he seemed to me to possess no qualification beyond that of being an admirable walker, but as a hunter he is still, I believe, unrivalled in the district, and any one going to Urusbieh for sport should certainly engage him. I cannot say that I thought him a pleasant companion, and when with travellers he expects to be treated very much as the chiefs are, with this important difference however, that the chiefs are not paid, and he is.

This mighty hunter then, who had greeted Moore warmly as an old friend, was to be our guide to the

top of Tau Sultra, for the ascent of which we got up on the morning of Friday, July 24, at that detestable hour which mountaineering so often makes necessary, namely, two in the morning. We started a little after three, Achia not having yet made his appearance, and after passing through the village, wherein all was dead for the time save two or three ever-watchful dogs, we struck up the slopes lying to the west of it, and shortly entered the more western of the two glens which unite above Urusbieh. Following a path which led through a pine forest, we were seized as day dawned with a fit of that laziness which is not uncommon when men have to be walking at the time usually given to sleep, and were wandering along in that state of dreamy indifference which may mar a mountain day as completely as indolence in early life may mar a man's whole career, when, fortunately for us, we were aroused to better doings. We saw a figure below us on the slopes, and knew that our hunter was coming. For men who had journeyed from England in the hope of ascending Elbruz, to be found by a Caucasian dawdling away invaluable hours in an easy valley, would not be well, so we braced ourselves to better action and fell into the regular mountain step, which did not, however, prevent Achia from overtaking us with small apparent effort. He was a beautiful walker certainly, having a strong, steady, elastic gait, rare even amongst good mountaineers.

There was no possible difficulty as to the line to be

taken, but we sent our hunter to the front, and under his guidance continued our way up the glen. Coming out of the wood we passed over a high alp, and stopped for a moment to talk to some shepherds, pleasant and genial as was natural to Urusbieh men. After the pastures came a vile wilderness of stones, through which we struggled to the head of the valley, a steep bank of grass thickly strewn with the same abominable stones. Climbing this we reached a beautiful frozen lake, lying in a little level space high up in the mountains, and saw Tau Sultra rising beyond this tarn to the west. The way to the top of the mountain was easy enough. We had to take to the glacier which rose from the lake, and to traverse its gentle gradients to the foot of a somewhat steeper incline, leading to the final slope of the mountain. The summit, which was of the ridge order, would then be reached, either by ascending an easy snow-bank, or by going up a tongue of rocks which ran nearly to the crest. We took to the glacier, therefore, but had to say good-bye for a time to Achia, who, seeing that by making a long circuit he could avoid the much detested snow, would not be tempted to come with us; so parting, to meet again on the top, we walked over the slopes, ascended the tongue of rocks which, though broken and treacherous as only rocks on a high mountain can be presented no difficulty, and reached with small labour the snow-ridge which constitutes the summit of Tau Sultra. This we struck close to its highest point, and gain-

ing it we finished our easy morning's work, and gazed on a view which would have been a noble reward for a really difficult ascent. On one side was the eastern peak of Elbruz, the vast size of which could be realised from this place so near to it. A strange mountain it looked: not beautiful or commanding, and yet not ugly, not commonplace. Gardiner exclaimed directly he saw it that it was like the often seen picture of a summit on a Japanese tea-tray, and this indeed it perfectly resembled; nor am I able to give any better description of it than to compare it to that well-known type. It should be remembered that the Japanese drawing represents a volcanic peak, and it was on an extinct volcano that we were now looking. On the other side the spectacle was in truth wonderful and magnificent, for all the glories of the main chain were before us, and we gazed on snow-peaks which seemed to us of unparalleled majesty and beauty. More remarkable than ever was their extremely steep and precipitous character, and as I looked on them it appeared to me as though they were to the Alps what fourteenth century Gothic is to Norman architecture. Even the most abrupt and imposing mountain of the Alpine range, that which seems, from wherever seen, to be *sui generis* and of a different family from the rest of the chain, is surpassed by the mighty Usch-Ba or rain-peak, the double-crested Matterhorn of the Caucasus. If the mountain which rises over Zermatt were greater and steeper; if close to its eastern face

rose another peak altogether resembling it; if the two were united by a vast curtain of precipitous rocks ending some distance below the summits; then would the likeness of Usch-Ba be presented to the eyes of travellers in Switzerland, and the overtopped Cervin be considered only as second to the mightier mountain. Perhaps in time, as approaching the Caucasus becomes easier and easier, the rain-peak will have many worshippers, such as have gathered long round the Pennine height; but let it be hoped that, if this be so, great Usch-Ba will escape one degradation which the Matterhorn has suffered, and will not be made the subject of fine writing. Perhaps it will be so difficult to say anything nonsensical about a mountain which has not already been said about the Matterhorn, that from very inability to invent new rhapsodies men will be obliged to admire in silence.

There is a curious story connected with Usch-Ba which shows what ridiculous legends are in a wild country invented concerning travellers, and also how these legends are sometimes believed by those who ought to know their real worth. At the time when we were journeying through the Northern Caucasus, Captain Telfer, R.N., the English officer whom we had met on board the Black Sea steamer, and afterwards at Kutais, was travelling in Suenetia. He saw and admired Usch-Ba from the southern side, and when talking of the mountain to a Russian officer in command of an outpost, was gravely informed that, six

years before, three English travellers with some Suenetians had attempted the ascent of one of the peaks; that they had failed utterly, and that they had thereupon paid the natives ten roubles apiece to say that they had reached the desired summit. This silly fable of Suenetian invention referred to Mr. Freshfield and his companions, who, I need hardly say, never attempted the ascent of Usch-Ba—never thought of attempting it. Any one with the smallest knowledge of mountaineering might be certain, after looking at the rain-peak, that it was not a mountain on which three travellers with one guide were likely to make an assault in the course of a rapid journey through the country. If Usch-Ba ever is ascended, it will be by a traveller who takes with him two or three first-class Swiss guides, and is able to give one or two seasons to a careful examination of the mountain. Men on duty in the Caucasus must find great difficulty in passing their time if they are driven to listen to and repeat the idiotic chatter of the natives, and surely must have discovered for themselves that the Suenetian barbarians are almost incapable of speaking the truth. What should we think of an Englishman who believed in the native gossip about a Russian travelling in a remote part of India?

The descent of Tau Sultra was even easier than the ascent. Achia, who had joined us on the top, came down with us, but was much disquieted in going over the snow. If he ever ascends again he will pro-

bably be happier, for I think that, in a fine summer, the slope leading to the crest will generally have little or no snow upon it, and that what we found there was due to the very bad weather which had recently prevailed. We halted for a little while to admire the frozen lake, and then passed through the stony wilderness, the pleasant pastures, and the forest to Urusbieh. Paul and the chief had managed to fall out during our absence, and the chief had declined to provide for us any further, which made us feel rather downcast, for we did not see how we were to start for Elbruz without his aid; but the difficulty, which might have been a serious one, was soon got rid of, as the elder and greater brother hearing that we were thus 'left out in the cold,' declared that it was a dishonour to his family, and that he would be our host himself; and a very good one he was, save when a droll, housekeeping perplexity arose, of which later on I shall have to speak. There had been a wedding in the village that day, and there was merry-making after the Urusbieh fashion during the evening. This seemed principally to consist in the men's assembling for conversational purposes on the roof of a house, but there was more pronounced rejoicing late in the night, for some of us were awakened by an indescribably dreary sound as of revellers. Muskets were also fired off at intervals, the Caucasians having, like the Neapolitans, this rather heavy-handed way of showing their joyfulness.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE ASCENT OF ELBRUZ.

The valley of the Adul-Su—Achia and the young Ismail—Necessity of starting for Elbruz sooner than we had intended—Time required for the expedition—Minghi-Tau the true name of the mountain—Determination of a Chief to come with us—Difficulty about getting provisions—Domestic troubles in the Caucasus—Walk up the valley—A false alarm—Bivouac in the forest—View of the two peaks of Elbruz up a lateral glen—Pass to the Karatchai country—A bouquetin stalked by Achia—Ascent to the rock plateau on the slopes of Elbruz—Arrival of a hunter with a letter from the Russian officers—A difficulty solved—TungSORUN—Sunset from the camp—Start for the summit—Relative position of the two peaks of the mountain—Huge snow-slopes—A wonderful sunrise—Col between the two peaks—Final incline of the western height—Peak ascended by Mr. Freshfield in 1868 found to be the eastern one—An extinct crater—Doubt as to the effect of the rarity of the air—The summit and the view thence.

THE next day (July 25) was given to a ramble through the beautiful valley of the Adul-Su, in which we were accompanied by Achia and our sworn friend the young Ismail. There is still much forest left in this vale; but felling is going on at a fearful rate, and probably before long the hill-sides will be as bare as so many others are throughout the country. The walls of the Urusbieh houses are built, not of stone, as in other parts of the northern Caucasus, but of large

baulks of timber, so that the demand for wood is great, and the Adul-Su forest being the nearest is preyed on ruthlessly. We saw one considerable slope, on which all the trees had quite lately been felled. The valley is of great beauty, and, according to Achia, game is to be found in it, although the village is close at hand. Traces of this game he set to work to discover, but we troubled ourselves little about the tracks of a bouquetin—albeit they were only two or three hours old—being of opinion that, even with less start than this, we might fail to catch the animal, and gave ourselves up to admiring the valley of the Adul-Su, which was, after that of the Upper Tcherek, the finest we saw on the northern side. High peaks of bold Caucasian outline rise from its western bank; the base and slopes are richly wooded, and at the head is a snow-clad ridge, lofty and very steep. A pass leads from this valley over the main chain into the Suenetian country.

After an easy ramble we got back to the village early, leaving Achia and the young Ismail to follow their examination of the bouquetin's tracks by a wild-goose chase—that is, by running after us; for being under the impression that we were ahead of them in the valley, they went nearly to the end to find us, fearing we might lose our way, and came, I am afraid, to the conclusion that we had disappeared in some mysterious and uncanny manner.

While they were thus vainly seeking us, we were holding a council as to our future course, which resulted

in the determination to start for Elbruz next day, Friday, July 26. Our original intention had been to leave Urusbieh for the mountain on the 28th, but we now found that, if we did not start before that day, we might have very great difficulty in reaching Soukhoum Kaleh in time for the steamer sailing on August 8; indeed, that we should probably miss it. We had therefore no choice but to leave on an earlier day, and we determined to start for the mountain on the 26th. We found that four days would be necessary for the expedition—1. From Urusbieh to a châlet at the head of the valley. 2. From the châlet to some rocks on the slopes of Elbruz. 3. To the summit of the mountain (we hoped), and down to the châlet. 4. From the châlet to Urusbieh. Lieutenant Bernoff had said that he should arrive at Urusbieh on the 26th. In the event of his getting there after we had left on that day, it would be easy for him to ride after us to the châlet, the time required for getting there on horseback not being great, though our progress with a multitude of dawdling natives would of necessity be slow. With Swiss guides and porters such an expedition as we were about to make would not require more than three days, or two days and a half, as it would be quite possible to reach the rocks in one long march from Urusbieh; but we knew that nothing would induce our Caucasian followers to do this, and we were therefore obliged to allow four days for the journey to the summit of Elbruz and back to the village.

Paul set to work to hire the necessary porters, and the elder and greater brother was entreated to have a sufficient supply of bread baked. That gracious *seigneur* promised that twenty loaves should be ready; and said, moreover, that he and one of his brothers meant to come with us, as they were anxious to ascend 'Minghi Tau.' This, I should observe, is the true name of the great mountain, and thus it is called all through the north-western Caucasus. Elbruz is a foreign name, being, I believe, a Persian word signifying simply snow-mountain, and it certainly seems hard that the highest summit in Europe should not be called by its rightful title. The word Elbruz is used, however, throughout these pages, as by that name the Caucasian peak is generally known.

We rejoiced much that the chief was coming, first because we liked him, and secondly because we thought that, as he was to be with us, he would take care that the provisions should be ready, and feeling safe on this score we were blissful that night, and kept up our 'at home' till a late hour, being well disposed towards the men of Urusbieh, and thinking that all was for the best in the best of all possible worlds.

Vain are the hopes of man. There was every promise of a beautiful day when we turned out next morning, and the porters whom Paul had engaged appeared not much more than an hour and a half after the appointed time, but food for the journey there was none at all. Now the staunchest mountaineer cannot

live for four days on mountain air alone, however great may be the quantity of ozone which it contains, and we struggled vigorously for the bread without which there was for us no hope of Elbruz. But we were much in the position of a man in an eating-house, who to his repeated calls can get no answer but 'Coming' from the flying waiter. So we were told at short intervals that the bread was ready and would be brought in a few minutes; but hours passed away, and nothing came except four undersized, half-baked loaves, which were truly a very mockery. It was as if, going to dine with a friend, one was offered a penny bun. Losing patience at last, Moore remonstrated sternly with the elder and greater brother, who had promised we should have all we needed, and received from the chief an answer which, I think, is worthy of the attention of those who have to keep house, should any such deign to read this record. Said the Chief—'It is true the bread is not ready, and I am sorry for it; but it is no fault of mine. It is owing to the indolence of my servants. Formerly, when we had slaves, we could get our household work done, because we could oblige them to do it; but now we have to employ free servants, and when they are not inclined to work they won't work. Last night and this morning my servants were in an idle humour, and would do nothing.' Whereat Moore was as one struck dumb, feeling that in his own land such things might happen. It may be some consolation to those who

have to struggle against home troubles to know that, even in the primitive Caucasus, the domestic difficulties exist which we are prone to consider as the results of a corrupting civilisation. I have mentioned this delay to show the apparently trifling, but really serious, obstacle which interferes with a mountain expedition in the Caucasus. Twenty loaves were no great requisition in rich Urusbieh, where food abounded; but preparing more than was necessary for immediate want was against all habit, and it seemed very unlikely we should get what we required. At last it was settled that Walker, Gardiner, and I should start, to show the natives that we were determined to go that day; and that Moore should remain behind with Paul, get provisions together by hook or by crook, and follow us in the evening. We three started, therefore, with Achia. The two chiefs who were going to ascend Minghi-Tau waited for Moore; but another of the brethren—an admirable rider, by the way—the meek chief of the village, and the young Ismail, came with us, so that it seemed likely we should be a goodly company on the mountain-side.

We traversed for some distance the level meadows of the valley's base, until we came about an hour and a half after leaving Urusbieh to a vast ancient moraine, where once ended a huge glacier. Passing over this, we continued our way along very easy ground, and reached a large farmhouse, where Achia made signs to us that we were to stop for the night. It was an

example of the short-sighted indolence, the apparent inability to think of anything beyond the day, which Caucasians so often show. Everything had been explained to Achia, and he knew that we were still some three hours' walk from the right camping-place. The work thus shunned for one day would have to be added to the labour of the next; but nevertheless Achia, who could, when he thought fit, go on with unchanging step up the most trying slopes for almost any time required, was unable to resist the temptation to stop after some two hours' easy walking, because he felt lazy and there was a resting-place at hand, and he clearly thought himself much ill-used at being obliged to go on. For some time after this our way was still through cultivated meadows, and we passed another large farmhouse. The valley grew narrower and more striking as we advanced, and there were wonderful glimpses up side gorges of snow-peaks, so lofty and so great that it was difficult to understand how there was room for their foundations in the narrow glens whence they seemed to rise. Presently we came to a place where a forest had apparently been destroyed, partly by felling and partly by fire, which latter had also consumed a small *châlet* which stood here. On the slopes above there was much evidence of ruthless cutting down of trees. Continuing our way we entered a beautiful wood, and after walking for a time close to the roaring Baksan, came presently to a deserted farmhouse, with a sad weed-grown garden, in

which the young Ismail picked a certain small vegetable, something between a turnip and a radish, of wonderfully stinging taste, calculated to take the skin off any but a Caucasian tongue. Three-quarters of an hour further through the wood took us to our camping-place for the night.

It was a little open space in the forest, covered with thick grass (what the French call a *pelouse*), as beautiful a woodland nook as the wanderer's eye could desire, and perfect for a bivouac, for the ground was level, there was plenty of dead wood about, and running water was within reach. A deserted ch[^]let offered some kind of shelter, but though the poor hut had long been left by human beings, the inhabitants of another kind were in such numbers that we determined at once to sleep in the open. We had with us Achia, some porters, the young prince, and the meek chief of the village. The other chief who had started with us had disappeared. With the two who stayed with us we could not talk, as the many-tongued Paul was with Moore; but as we sat round the blazing fire which our men had quickly made, we tried to converse by signs, with the usual result, that nobody had the slightest idea what any one else meant, but we solved difficulties by shaking hands all round at intervals, and there being a general impression of amity and goodwill on both sides, time slipped away pleasantly enough. Night had long fallen, and an exposition of sleep was on some of us, when Achia, who was lying

stretched at full length on the grass, suddenly sprang up quick and noiseless as a greyhound, and, going a few steps, seemed to peer into the darkness. I listened, and could hear nothing, but his wonderful ear had caught the sound of distant voices, and his companions, though even to them there was nothing as yet audible, were instantly on the alert, for there was some little doubt who the men might be whose voices Achia heard. They were probably our friends coming up the valley, but, on the other hand, they might be Suenetians, who had crossed the Nakra pass and were on their way down to Urusbieh. Now Suenetians are children of nature, that is, of nature such as Mr. Mill understood it to be; and in this remote part of the valley it was just as well to be prepared for any attention they might wish to pay us. I do not at all mean to say that raids are made into the Baksan valley, or that, as a matter of course, Suenetians would fall upon us and try to rob us; but being close to their own country, with retreat so easy, the temptation might be too great for poor, frail human nature to withstand, and moral principle, no less than a regard for our own safety, made it imperative that we should seem and be prepared. I made out what was the matter from hearing the native word for Suenetian pass between our men.

The possibility that a deadly struggle may be close at hand gives a strange feeling. I believe that most men who have experienced it would confess, if they

held to the naked truth, that the sensation was not a pleasant one. In like case once before I heard a sailor say, after his fashion, what seemed to me to express that which many a man, not a coward, has felt when making ready for the fight. Many years ago, during the Russian war, I was a midshipman on board a frigate cruising off the island of Saghalin, in the sea of Okhotsk. We were on the look out for H.M.S. *Encounter*, which was in those waters, and there was also considerable chance of our meeting a Russian frigate. About five o'clock one morning in a thick fog a large craft was sighted on the weather-bow. There were few sail in those seas at that time, and we had very little doubt that this was either the *Encounter* or a Russian. Said the captain of one of the guns to me, while we were uncertain whether we were to meet a friend or have a frigate action, 'I don't know how you feel, Mr. Grove, but I'll tell you how I do. I feel in a blasted funk, but I mean to fight my gun the best I can, by God.' The vessel turned out to be the *Encounter*, so that he was relieved from the necessity of fighting his gun at all; but I think he would have kept his word.

I hope that we should have borne ourselves well if it had been necessary to do battle with Suenetians, but we had no opportunity of determining this, for after a very short suspense the unerring Achia distinguished the voices of his fellows, and in a little time Moore, with a number of Caucasians, some of whom bore the

much-desired loaves, joined us. There were with him the elder and greater, two other brothers, with several retainers, and some of our porters, so that we were a large company. The Caucasians had meant to pass the night in the swarming ch[^]âlet, but finding that we were going to sleep on the grass, they immediately determined to do the same, flung themselves down round the huge fire with the unconscious grace they often show, and devoted themselves for a time to unflagging conversation.

It was a strangely beautiful scene that night's bivouac. The tiny meadow in the dark forest; the splendid looking Caucasians sitting and lying round the strong flame; altogether a sight so picturesque and so perfect that it seemed impossible to believe that it was a real *bonâ fide* camp of wild hunters and travellers who were not thinking the least how they looked. It was too like a picture, and seemed as if it must have been arranged by some great master of effect.

Heavy mists gathered on the hill-sides in the evening, but everything cleared away during the night, and the sun rose on an unclouded sky. We were up at daybreak, and getting off after some little delay, followed the path which led partly through the wood and partly through open spaces towards the head of the valley. Shortly after leaving our sleeping-place, we passed the track leading to the Nakra pass, by which communication is principally maintained between the upper valley of the Baksan and Suenetia. The route

is over a snow col of no apparent difficulty. Mr. Freshfield and his companions crossed this path in 1868, and we had intended to have come by it into the Baksan valley, if the weather had allowed us to get to Suenetia from the valley of Bezingi—*dis aliter visum*. The Nakra is not infrequently traversed by Suenetians. An hour and a quarter's walk from the camp brought us to the mouth of a lateral glen, up which we saw the two peaks of Elbruz, looking as if within about two hours' walk, as mountains are apt to do when seen from the valley. The eastern peak, which of course was the nearest to us, seemed to be a vast mound, just such as a volcano might be expected to produce, the further peak of which we could see comparatively little, being apparently flat-topped. By going up this glen, into which the south-eastern glacier of Elbruz descends, Mr. Freshfield and his companions reached in 1868 the rocks on which they passed the night before, ascending the mountain. Achia, however, now said that we should get much more easily to the same place by going up the next glen, that is, the one lying on the further side of the ridge forming the right bank of the glen first seen. We accordingly continued our way along the valley for twenty minutes or so, and then halted at a small, very rough hut, placed in an open space near the foot of the glacier which fills the head of the valley of the Baksan. We had intentionally come something beyond the mouth of the glen we were to ascend, as this was a good place for leaving

the horses which the Caucasians had brought with them. Over the glacier there is a pass to the country of the Karatchai, and this we had meant to cross after Elbruz ; but we had found that there would be a difficulty about getting porters ; the shortness of our time did not allow us to run the risk of having to turn back, so we had resolved to go round by the grass country to the north of Elbruz. The pass looked easy enough for men, but as to horses, Achia said that they could be driven over if a cold wind had hardened the snow, but that if it was soft they would probably be lost. So far as we saw it, the pass did not seem to be of any beauty.

While we were looking at the glacier and making out the best line over it, we were aware of a certain excitement amongst the Caucasians who had at first been busy in cutting up a sheep for cooking, but who were now gazing intently on the great slope of grass and dull-coloured rocks opposite them on the northern side of the valley. It was the prospect of a hunt which moved them. Soon after we came to the hut, Achia's lynx-like eyes discovered far up on the slope two flecks of brown invisible to every one else. These he immediately pronounced to be bouquetin, and having with a very indifferent glass which he carried convinced himself that he was right, he started at once to stalk the game. Crossing the meadow to the foot of the slope, he ascended it with wonderful rapidity, and at the same time with admirable skill, twisting, screw-

ing, and turning, so that some of the rocks or big stones which jutted out from, or were scattered over the hill-side, were always between him and the bouquetin. This would not have been an easy thing to do if he could have taken his time over it, but at his pace it was in truth a noble stalk, such as a Highlander might have envied. Getting presently as high on the slope as the game was, but at a considerable distance to leeward of it, he turned and crept very stealthily, and a little more slowly than before, towards the unsuspecting bouquetin. Very hard it was to see the hunter now, for he was so far off as to seem no more than a tiny dark spot on the hill-side, and he constantly disappeared, as taking advantage of every bit of cover he warily stole towards his game. Finally he disappeared for some minutes in a wrinkle on the hill-side; then a shot was heard, the hunter appeared for a moment, disappeared again, this time for a considerable period. Much divided in opinion as to whether he had killed or not, the Caucasians set to work to cook their food, while we, lying on the grass and looking at the unclouded sky, hoped earnestly that it might so remain until we had grappled with Minghi Tau.

Just as they had done a loin to a turn, for at this rough cooking they were perfect, Achia appeared at a point far distant from that where he had last been seen, bearing on his shoulders a dead bouquetin. It was but a kid which he had killed, but his stalk had been a masterly one, and he was deservedly applauded

by the others when he joined them for a jovial carouse on mutton and sour milk, after which they had what doctors call some refreshing sleep. Rousing them after awhile from this, we persuaded them, with a little difficulty, to start; and I had the satisfaction of observing Moore's brow, which had for once darkened somewhat, regain its habitual serenity. Like all good mountaineers he hates dawdling, and on this occasion the halt, being principally for the purpose of eating, had been, as it were, a practical protest against his views respecting mountain diet, at which he took very just umbrage.

Retracing our steps a little way we entered the mouth of the glen, the first part of which was exceedingly steep. After toiling up very trying grass-slopes under a blazing sun for three-quarters of an hour, no man was sorry to find the rise of the glen become more gentle as its higher part was reached. It was a blank desolate place as the eye could rest on; in very truth a 'valley of rocks,' showing little but stones and débris. From the top of its left bank, however, Elbruz was very beautifully seen, and thence Walker took the photograph which has furnished the frontispiece to this book. The nearer of the two peaks is the eastern height of Elbruz; that to the left, and further off, the western and, as is supposed, slightly higher summit. On this bank of the valley, close to its head, were some mounds of loose stones; passing over these, and crossing a small patch of snow, we came to the rock

plateau where our camp for the night was to be. A better spot for a mountain bivouac could hardly be desired. The rock was fairly level, with some little depressions here and there, so that it would be easy to obtain shelter from the wind. A stream ran across the plateau, and in some places a little earth lay over the hard stones, so that it would be possible to get a fairly soft sleeping-place. Then the sight from the camp was a glorious one, for the height of the spot we had reached was 11,300 feet, and there was nothing to interrupt our view of the main chain. The position of the plateau is best described by saying that it is on the right bank of the south-eastern glacier of Elbruz, nearly on a level with the brow of its icefall. The place where Mr. Freshfield and his companions camped in 1868 is slightly higher, but was now covered with snow.

It was still early in the afternoon when we reached the sleeping-place, and having admired for some time the magnificent view, we were dining as doctors recommend men to dine, that is, off one dish, which in this case was brown bread, when a stately hunter suddenly appeared on the top of the nearest mound of stones, and coming down it crossed the patch of snow with a step as lithe and springy as Achia's. What the splendid looking fellow could want puzzled us much, for he was not of our party, and Caucasians are little given to taking afternoon strolls on the mountain-side. He made straight for the elder and greater brother,

and after an animated conversation, without which nothing is ever done in the Caucasus, handed him a letter, which was forthwith given to Moore. It was from Lieutenant Bernoff, who with Lieutenant Kwitka had arrived at Urusbieh at ten that morning (the 27th), and who now wrote to Moore telling him that he and his companion intended leaving Urusbieh as soon as they had taken a little rest, and that they earnestly begged us not to start for the ascent without them.

Now this was a very pretty dilemma. We had previously determined to leave our camp at one the next morning—*i.e.*, the morning of July 28—as it was certain we should have small chance of traversing the vast snow-fields of Elbruz unless we started some time before sunrise. The Russian officers had ridden all night to reach Urusbieh. To get to our camp from that place they would have a ride of some five hours more up the valley, and then a walk of four up the lateral glen. They might succeed in joining us that night, but it was obvious that if they did so they would be utterly unfit to begin the ascent of Elbruz at one in the morning. To allow men who had been eighteen or nineteen hours on horseback, and had then walked up a valley in part very steep, to start for a mountain 18,526 feet high, was simply to allow them to go to certain failure, and we thought that it would be most unfair, almost dishonourable, to let them begin the ascent, when we knew that it would be absolutely impossible that they

could succeed. On the other hand, if we delayed a day for them, and did not attempt Elbruz until the 29th, we ran considerable chance of missing the ascent altogether. The evening was beautiful, and the beauty was of that kind which augurs well for the morrow. The barometer, after marking the height we had reached, remained steady, and everything seemed to promise a glorious day. Now if there is one article of faith more deeply rooted than any other in the mountaineers' creed, it is that fine weather should never be lost.

A flower there is that shineth bright,
 Some call it marigold-a ;
 He that wold not when he might,
 He shall when he wold-a.

Many an Alpine climber has regretted letting a day of sunshine go by in the belief that the next would prove of like brightness. After having journeyed so far that we might ascend the great mountain, to dawdle at its base while all was fair, and then to be defeated by snowstorm or gale, would be intolerable, and we felt sure that Elbruz was a mountain of which the summit would be utterly inaccessible to man in bad weather. What happened afterwards altogether justified our anxiety to seize a favourable day.

On the other hand, we did not at all like to desert the Russians who had come so far to set foot on the snows of Minghi Tau, so we were sorely puzzled and in much doubt what to do, until the difficulty was

solved, as difficulties often are, by the self-sacrifice of one of the party. Moore, on the ground that he had told Lieutenant Bernoff that we should not leave Urusbieh until the 28th, and that he had made the ascent in 1868, resolved to remain behind while Walker, Gardiner, and I assaulted the mountain next morning (the 28th), and to go up with the Russians on the 29th. I very much regret to say that, by this arrangement, Moore lost for the season the ascent of Elbruz.

The engraving, on the opposite page, of the huge mountain Tungsorun, which rises at the head of the valley of the Baksan, is from a photograph which was taken during the afternoon from a spot near our camp. We saw this mountain from many points of view, and it appeared to us possible, though by no means certain, that its summit might be reached.

I wish that it was in my power to give the reader any idea, any hint, any inkling of the glories of sunset as seen from our high resting-place; but even writers of a real descriptive power to which I can lay no claim, have failed to record in words which should tell aught to others what they looked on when the day went down on the great mountains. Who can describe the colour and radiance of the changing sky, the majesty of the mighty range, or its glorious beauty as the sunset reddened its snows? Such a scene cannot be rendered in words becoming in any attempt to describe it a *caput mortuum*, a dull rhapsody, leaving the impres-



TUNGSORUN FROM THE SLOPES OF FIRRIJ.

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sion of a long catalogue of peaks and ridges hopelessly mixed with an account of the solar spectrum.

As has been said, there were good sleeping-places on the plateau, the rock of which was here and there covered with a light bed of earth, not exactly such as would have delighted a Norfolk farmer, but pleasantly soft to lie upon after a number of stones had been picked out of it. At half-past twelve the *reveillez* was sounded for Elbruz, and we got up, happily surprised to find that, in spite of a high wind, the temperature was by no means so low as we had expected. On mountains, even more than elsewhere, the coldest time seems to be just before dawn. We none of us felt the cold at all when we got up, but Moore suffered greatly from it some two hours and a half later when daylight was at hand.

At 1 A.M. Walker, Gardiner, Peter Knubel, and I started. The direct course was over a snow *grat* above the rocky plateau, but the bank leading to this was steep, and to have ascended it would have required some little time; so, to turn the obstacle we struck to the right, and made our way over short slopes of snow broken by little ridges of rock. Turning to the left after we had passed these, we found ourselves on the vast south-eastern snowfield of Elbruz, and over this our course lay towards the summit, the position of which I will now attempt to explain. The two peaks of the mountain lie, according to the Russian map, south-east by south and north-west by north of each other, but

I am almost certain that these bearings are not accurate, and think it highly probable that more careful examination will show that the peaks are nearly east and west of each other. It was impossible, however, for reasons which will be stated further on, to take an accurate observation with the compass on the summit, so that I am not able to state precisely the relative position of the twin heights, but we all came to the conclusion that the bearing was close to east and west, and therefore they have been and will be spoken of as the eastern and western peaks.

Of these the eastern was the nearest to our camping-place, the western height lying beyond it. As seen from a point near the snow *grat*, they appeared much as they do in the woodcut from Walker's photograph, the western peak being to the left of and partly hidden by the other, which was surrounded by a vast snowfield undulating in gentle slopes of varying inclination. What we could see of the side of the western eminence was rather steep, but not enough so to offer any serious obstacle. The top was apparently flat and of some extent. The other peak appeared to be a gently-sloping cone. I speak of these two heights as peaks for brevity's sake, but they would be more accurately described by calling one a flat-topped mountain, and the other a vast mound. The western one, that is, the table mountain, was our object. It is the highest of the two according to the Russian survey, topping its brother, however, only by ninety-five feet; but as being

the loftiest, though only in very small degree, this western summit we desired to win, and for it we sought to shape our course. It appeared clear that we should do this best by ascending the vast snow-field surrounding the lower peak, trending continually to the left, so as to skirt round it to a point some 1,500 feet below the summit. From this point we could reach the col between the two peaks. It was obvious that we should not see the col until we were close upon it, and there was some danger that we might get too high, and find it beneath us when we came in sight of it, but we had reasons for supposing that it was of great height, and in every mountain expedition something must be left to chance. Skirting the mountain lower down might involve considerable loss of time.

Our course lay then over the vast field of snow-covered glacier surrounding the eastern peak, and for some hours we ascended the huge slopes of névé, trending continually to our left. Obstacles we found none whatever; but it was a wearisome and monotonous walk. There was, indeed, about an hour and a half from the camp, a crevasse to be passed, which in a warm season might give some trouble, but now it was so narrow that we crossed it as easily as might be; in fact, we did not find what by any possibility could be called a difficult step between the *grat* and the foot of the final slope of the western peak. It was simply a long wearisome trudge over a vast, gently-rising field of snow.

Now this may seem a very trifling thing to those who have never sought the high mountains, but men who have been much in the Alps know that there is nothing more tiring and more depressing than a long ascent over snow-slopes. The work is exhausting, and at the same time utterly unexciting. There is severe labour for the body, while the mind remains totally unoccupied, the result being deep sadness and great disgust at the whole of creation, and at that miserable little atom of it the *ego* in particular. For once the thick screen which interposes between a man's reason and his estimate of himself is lifted. He sees himself as others see him, and wonders much that anybody could ever breathe a prayer for such a gift. All the follies he may recently have committed stand out before him in vivid colours, and pre-eminent is that transcendent one of going up a mountain. How he ever came to commit such an act of idiocy; how, having once done it, he ever came to repeat it, and what inclined him on this occasion to attempt this particularly detestable peak, are questions which his conscience asks him with odious pertinacity. Something definite, however, does spring from his misery. A lingering feeling of self-respect makes him persevere for the day—indeed he spurns the thought of giving in on this occasion; but nothing, he swears, shall ever tempt him on to the weary slopes again; and in this state of mind he remains until more exciting work distracts him from morbid thoughts, or until arrival at the summit restores that sound and

wholesome vanity without which there would perhaps be small amount of successful effort either in mountain expeditions or in much greater things. To contempt for his folly in coming on to the snow, succeeds admiration for the calm English resolution which has made him persevere so long on the laborious way. Evil resolutions vanish, self-complacency comes back with a cheerful glow, and the only question is how soon it will be practicable to ascend another peak.

Now the slopes of Elbruz were of this tedious and wearying nature. Exceedingly gentle at first, they were nowhere steep, but owing to the great height which was soon reached, and to the absolute monotony of the labour, the ascent was trying, and was made the more so by the cold which, as sunrise drew near, became intense. Fortunately the wind had subsided, or a fair amount of frost-bite must have been inevitable. After four hours' going, having risen more than four thousand feet, we halted for a few minutes at a patch of rocks which cropped up through the great desert of snow at about the height of the top of Mont Blanc. And here came one of those boons, more than recompensing for cold and labour, which are sometimes granted to the faithful who seek high places. We gazed on a sight of almost indescribable beauty. The sun was rising, and the eastern sky was all aflame. The moon, which was nearly full, was setting on the mountains just at the time of dawn, and for a moment the heavens were divided between the dead beauty of night and the light

and glory of the coming day. Wonderful too, even amid the entrancing splendour of the scene, was the vast shadow of Elbruz thrown by the rising sun to a great height on the western sky. But this soon was filled with light. Day prevailed as the pale satellite disappeared among clouds of sable and silver, and a contrast such as not one of us had ever seen was ended. Remembering that there were still 3,000 feet between us and the summit, we started again, after halting a few minutes only, and continued the ascent of the snowfield, trending rather more than before to the left. Having risen some 1,500 feet higher, we came in sight, about an hour and a half after we left the rocks, of the col between the two summits. It was close to us and a little above us, and after walking at a level along the easy slope which intervened between us and it, we halted to rest for awhile at a point about 200 feet below the actual col.

We were now at the foot of the final incline leading to the edge of the flat top of the western peak. The slope rose before us, steep but not forbidding. Considerably to our left, that is, to the south, were some precipices, but in front of us there was nothing to give any difficulty, so we were able to rest with light hearts—indeed, with too light hearts; for, owing to the hard work and to the thin air, that important part of one's organisation seemed to be performing a wild dance of which the time, if there was any, was decidedly irregular. The place where we thus halted in the little

valley between the two peaks was over 17,000 feet high, but how much over we could not tell. Walker had brought with him an excellent aneroid, graduated up to 20,000 feet, and this instrument marked our ascent with great steadiness until we had reached a height of 17,000 feet and were close to our halting-place under the col. On arriving there, however, we found that the needle had jumped to the extreme height it could mark, nor would any cunning taps or shakes cause it to depart from these obviously incorrect figures. After 17,000 feet, therefore, we could only guess at the heights we attained until we reached the summit. We halted, as I have said, at a point some 200 feet below the col, and I am inclined to think that we had not then risen more than 150 feet since the barometer gave its last accurate reading. The col, therefore, would be about 17,350 feet above the sea. Our halting-place will easily be recognised by any future traveller, as it is at the base of a ridge of rocks which runs for some distance up the slope of the western peak. Close to the foot of this ridge is a large boulder, on which a very pleasant bask in the sun may be taken. It is possible that, in another season, much of the slope of the western peak which we found snow-covered will be bare rock, as there was at the time of our ascent an unusual quantity of snow on the mountain.

After about half an hour's halt we started up this final slope, which presented the only difficulty, if diffi-

culty it could be called, which we encountered. First we climbed the rocks I have mentioned; these were firm and easy as any rocks could be. From the point where they ended we ascended for awhile the snow-slope, which, though not very steep, was still steep enough to require some step-cutting; but this did not last long, for we soon came to an easy little ridge of rock, after scaling which we took to the snow again, cutting a few steps here and there, but generally kicking them. Ascending in this way the moderate incline, we came, at the head of it, to a cornice, through which we made our way without difficulty, and found ourselves on the edge of a great field of *névé*, the covering of a mighty extinct crater, the rim of which we had reached. A little peak rising from this rim on the north-east was clearly the highest point of the great mountain.

For some time before we attained the crater's edge it had become clear to me that the peak we were ascending was not the same as that of which Mr. Freshfield and his companions reached the top; that they had, in fact, gone up the eastern peak, which, according to the Russian survey, is by a very slight difference the lower of the two. That huge cone they found to be undoubtedly volcanic, the crater on the top being most clearly marked. It was of course in the highest degree probable that the western peak would prove to be also volcanic, but it was interesting to verify the fact, and most pleasant to find ourselves on virgin snows. Delight in reaching an untrodden summit may

seem a childish pleasure to many, but never to those who have once experienced it.

The western crater considerably exceeds in size that on the twin summit, and is probably about three-quarters of a mile in diameter. The wall is perfect for some two-thirds of its former circuit, but on the south-west side a vast piece has fallen away, and a great glacier now flows down from the gap. Terrible indeed must have been the throes of that eruption which rent this immense fragment from the mountain-side; but there were no human beings then to be affrighted at the fearful beacon. For time immeasurable the crater has been peaceful. Ice has taken the place of lava, and over the scoriae and débris which fill the great cavity nature has cast a thick mantle of eternal snow.

The field of névé which covers what was once the crater rises towards the east almost to a level with the rim, but sinks rapidly towards the south-western gap, the crater-wall rising considerably above the snow-field. The little peak which is the actual summit of the mountain juts up on the north-eastern segment of the rim, and was afterwards clearly distinguished by us from the village of Utchkulan in the Karatchai country. As we rested for a few moments on the snow before going to this absolute highest point, I had an opportunity of cogitating on the question of the rarity of the air, which had been forcing itself on my notice during the latter part of the ascent. About rarefied

air many mistakes have been made, as all versed in Alpine story know. In former days, when mountaineering was not so well understood as it is now, men attributed to rarefaction the exhaustion which came from their not being sufficiently strong or practised for the work they had to do. Nowadays those who ascend mountains know that if they are, as the phrase goes, 'in good condition,' they will not suffer from the rarity of the air on the highest peaks of the Alps; and if a man complains of it he is usually looked upon as trying to put the fact that he is knocked up in a way agreeable to himself. But obviously on mountains higher than the Alps there must be a limit at which the thinness of the air will begin to tell even on the most powerful and best-trained men. It may be taken for granted that no human being could walk to the top of Mount Everest. Indeed, the fatal balloon ascent from Paris seems to show that the air is too thin to sustain life at a point a good deal lower than the top of that mountain. At what height, then, I asked myself, is this limit? Was the unusual exhaustion of which I had been conscious after we had passed 17,000 feet due to fatigue or to the thin air? Out of a party of four, three were decidedly affected, Gardiner and Peter Knubel suffering considerably during the latter part of the ascent, though not so much as I did. Walker, however, was not in the least exhausted, though he was afflicted with bleeding at the nose. At the moment it certainly seemed impossible,

judging from what I felt myself, not to attribute our woes to rarefaction ; but I am now of opinion that our prostration was due principally to our not being in fit bodily condition for severe walking, and only in a small degree, if at all, to the thinness of the air. I believe that a well-trained man, with a heart strong and regular in its action, will not, if accustomed to mountains, suffer from the rarity of the air at heights under 18,500 feet when walking up slopes of gentle inclination. With heavier labour it might be different. My reasons for this belief are :—

First, we found, as men have so often done in the Alps, that the exhaustion vanished, to a great extent, at an early stage in the descent. Secondly, one of the party was not at all affected. Thirdly, when Mr. Freshfield and his companions ascended the eastern peak, which is all but equal in height to that we were on, not one of the party felt any unusual exhaustion. They were six in number—three Englishmen, a Chamouni guide, and two Caucasians. It is impossible to believe that they were all men blessed with exceptional hearts and lungs. I am disposed to think then that the prostration of which three of us were conscious was due to the wearing effect of snow-walking on men ‘ out of condition.’ The constant wetting we had undergone, together with the enforced abstinence from any kind of wine whatever, and the total change of diet, were enough to account for our not being in proper training for good mountain work.

But it would have been a weary man indeed who would have failed to reach the highest point of the mountain after once the rim of the crater had been gained. The little peak or tooth rises, as I have said, from the north-eastern part of this, which we had struck from the south-east, and we had therefore to go round inside the rim for some distance ; but the way was almost level. With victory in our grasp, then, we walked across the snow, which might almost be looked on as the winding-sheet of the dead volcano, passing at one point a sight of beauty, the like of which I had never seen on any mountain. A small pinnacle jutted up close to the edge, and the wind had driven the loose snow against this little column and had there twined it, strange to say, into ribands and wreaths which in festoons of rare beauty thickly covered the pinnacle from top to base. It might have been Lot's wife, supposing her to have been in gala dress at the time of her mishap. Going on, after pausing for a moment to look at this strange thing, we came to the foot of the little peak which may have been from a hundred to a hundred and fifty feet in height. Mounting its easy slope, we stood at last on the summit of Elbruz.

The day was perfectly clear. There was no cloud in the sky, nor any haze on the horizon ; and I think man could hardly desire or hope for a more glorious sight than that which we gazed on from the crest of the great mountain. Standing at the end of a pro-

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montory jutting out from the main chain, Elbruz gives a vantage ground from which the mighty range of the Caucasus is seen, not confusedly as it would be from a peak in the midst of it, but distinctly as a line of battle would be seen from a flag-ship in front of the rest. All the great peaks stood out clear in their stern majesty of form. Near at hand was the double-headed giant, *Usch-Ba*; then a range of nameless Titans, and then many leagues away, but sharp in outline as though seen from the *Urban glacier*, the mighty *Kotchán Tau* and the lesser heights of *Dych Tau* and *Tau Tetnuld*. Beyond these again peak after peak, until the eye rested on a pinnacle which I think to have been *Kasbek*. That mountain is some hundred and twenty miles from *Elbruz*, but it is possible that we looked on a crest separated from us by a space much greater even than this. Far, far away towards *Persia* I could, as I fancied, just make out very faintly a snow summit, and if this was real and not imagined it must have been the crown of *Ararat*. Very likely it was a mere fleck of white cloud, but it is said that *Elbruz* has been seen from *Ararat*; and if this be true, that summit must have been visible on a day of such marvellous clearness. To the south the huge valleys could be partly seen over the crest of the main chain, and towards the south-west the *Black Sea* could be clearly distinguished. To the north was the green country, the grassy ridges rising one behind the other like the waves of the sea, until afar off one

of them crowned by a low rampart of rock seemed to mark the boundary of the great plains of Russia. Altogether the view from the highest point of Elbruz was even grander and more beautiful than I had expected, and greatly surpassed anything I had ever looked on in the course of many years' wandering in the high Alps.

But it was not merely the variety and beauty of the glorious spectacle which were impressive. Standing there close to the boundary between Asia and Europe, came the thought of the ancient but fast declining races on the one hand, and, on the other, of that mighty country as yet in its youth, whose huge future power for good or evil is now but beginning to be recognised by men. Then, as if in mockery of the vanity of all things human, there were the ashes of the dead volcano strewn around to tell of vast cycles of time, compared with which even those great periods which mark the rise and fall of empires are but as the running of the sands in an hour-glass.

CHAPTER IX.

RETURN TO URUSBIEH—THE WAYS OF THE
CAUCASIANS.

Descent of Elbruz—Contemplated ascent of the mountain by Moore and the Russian officers next day—Descent to the valley—Caucasian chatter—The evening after a high ascent—Return to Urusbieh—Prince Mohammed—The ways of the Caucasians—Their powers of endurance as compared with those of the Swiss—Caucasian dress—Return of the Russian officers and Moore—Their expedition on Elbruz—Prince Mohammed's account of a great forest country—Its position—A delicate question between us and our hosts—Their farewell.

IT will have been seen from the foregoing account, that Elbruz, though a tiring mountain, presents no difficulty to the mountaineer. The ascent is indeed nothing but a steady trudge, save where the way lies over the slope leading from the point just below the col to the rim of the crater. There we had, as has been said, to cut some steps, and in coming down these a little care was necessary, but the difficulty was as slight as could be for men at all accustomed to mountains. How it might be with those who had no experience of snow or ice work, I can hardly say, for it is not easy to allow sufficiently for the ingenuity which unpractised men show in their attempts—often successful—to do themselves injury. It is just possible that,

by sedulous carelessness, a roll over could be brought about on this slope, which however, would perhaps in another season, be entirely different. It might be hard ice, or the ridges of rock might be bare all the way to the summit. In the summer of 1874 there was an unusual quantity of snow on all the great peaks of the Caucasus.

On the summit we were only able to remain for twenty minutes. So far as clearness went, the day was all that could possibly be desired, but the wind had some strength, and this made it so bitterly cold on a summit 18,526 feet high, that it was impossible to stay there long. Indeed, as it was, one of the party was frost-bitten. Coming down the little peak, and going to the place where we had struck the rim, we descended the slope, and rested for a time at our previous halting-place, which being sheltered from the breeze was perfectly warm. It was about noon. We had arrived at the highest point at 10.40, having left the camp at 1 A.M., so that the ascent had taken us nine hours and forty minutes; but probably the mountain might be scaled in a shorter time than this, as our progress over the last part of the way had been very leisurely. We had plenty of time to spare, and I certainly had reasons for particularly disliking undue haste. I believe that the ascent of Elbruz might be made in from eight hours to eight hours and a half. The descent, as will presently be seen, can be effected very quickly after the slope below the rim has been passed.

That the peak we had ascended was not the same as that scaled by Mr. Freshfield and his companions in 1868, I had no doubt whatever, and Walker and Gardiner were of the same opinion. When we compared notes afterwards with Mr. Freshfield and Mr. Moore, they also came to the conclusion that the summit we stood on was not the same as that which they had reached, and it may be considered as certain that they ascended eastern, we the western peak.¹ Of these the latter is, according to the five-verst map, the higher by 95 feet. This is a sufficiently small fraction of 18,526 feet, the height of the western summit, but I doubt whether even this small difference exists. When we stood on the western summit the other appeared to be on a level with us, and I believe that careful observations would show the two peaks to be almost exactly equal in height. Until observations are made, however, the five-verst map, as embodying the only survey yet made of the country, must be taken to be correct, and the western summit must be assumed to be the higher one.

From it what appeared to be the highest point of the other summit bore east by south, but when the tops of mountains are of considerable extent—if the expression may be allowed—it is obvious that one bearing is not likely to show even approximately their relative position. To have ascertained this would

¹ This peak was entirely hidden by the clouds at the time of Mr. Freshfield's ascent.

have taken far more time than that during which we were able to remain on the summit. After leaving the halting-place by the col, the descent was nothing but a quick and easy walk down the huge slopes of the mountain; the snow being in such good order that until we were nearly at the end of our course, we were able to make a very rapid march. The camp was reached at three, the whole descent from the summit having occupied only four hours, and as we got back so early we determined to go down to the valley that night. The two Russian officers had arrived shortly after we had left in the morning. Exhausted by their long journey, they could not of course have started with the slightest chance of success, or indeed of reaching any considerable height on the mountain; but apparently they were not destined to lose the ascent, for the weather was to all seeming likely to be perfect, and everything promised well for the expedition next day. The band which was to leave the camp would be six in number, and would be of a composite or international character, as there would be in it an Englishman, two Russians, two Caucasians, and a Swiss. They were to start, as we had done, at one in the morning, and the arrangement seemed good to all except poor Peter Knubel, who was wofully tired, and felt by no means certain that he could ascend Elbruz two days running. However, he promised to do what he could, and then, after the fashion of guides, went to sleep, although the afternoon was yet young; while we

started for the valley, after wishing Moore and his companions good-speed. Alas, what had been our good fortune was their curse. The extraordinary clearness of the day, owing to which we were able to see objects at so great a distance, was the sign of a coming change, as remarkable transparency of the atmosphere so often is. Next day the weather had lost its serenity, and a furious storm broke on the peaks of Minghi Tau. We strolled down towards the valley, straggling as men frequently do when they have escaped from the enforced regularity which the rope necessitates in mountain walking, and, getting behind my companions, I joined some of our porters who were going down, and we picked out the worst possible way with singular unanimity. After we had descended part of the glen, we met, on their way back to the camp, two of our men who had been sent down for provisions. Now my fellows having been separated from these their comrades for six or eight hours, an interchange of ideas was absolutely needful, so they all sat down on the grass for conversational purposes, and for some time every man spoke at once, including myself, for I confess that I did use what Byron calls our 'shibboleth,' in the hope of getting the laggards on; but I might as well have tried to sing the trees down the hill-side, like Orpheus. To Caucasians, who regard talking as the most pleasurable thing in life, the fact that a man talks loudly only proves that he is enjoying himself rather more thoroughly than usual,

and is showing his pleasure just as a dog does when he barks on being taken out for a walk. Accordingly, when I shouted at the porters, they merely suspended their chat for a moment to turn towards me with the most gracious and winning smiles, wishing to intimate, I believe, that they were glad I was having my say too, though sorry I could not join in the general conversation. I went on my way therefore without them, and the right line for getting out of the glen being somewhat hard to follow, very speedily lost that way; but I succeeded in finding another, and after struggling down some treacherous grass slopes, and crossing the stream at the wrong place, came in sight of the little chalet whence there rose a sweetly suggestive smoke. On getting to the hut I found Walker and Gardiner already arrived, the admirable Paul hard at work cooking, with the meek chief of the village and the pleasant young Ismail looking on. Whence the two last had come we knew not, but all the members of the family had a trick of vanishing and reappearing at unexpected moments, which we thought an agreeable characteristic of theirs, as giving variety to a day.

Going up a big mountain is an act of smallest importance to the world, and does not, like knowledge of Greek or high birth, entitle a man to think himself very much better than his fellows; but nevertheless on the evening after a high ascent there is a warm feeling of exultation which could hardly be surpassed if a great object had been achieved. There is the

thought that a good piece of work has been done and that rest is well earned, and a humble likeness of that deserved repose which comes after success in much larger enterprises. Indeed it may be that one of the principal reasons of the attractiveness of mountain expeditions is, that they present a little picture of the great and serious efforts of life. One thing they certainly have in common with these. A man who starts to go up a mountain must concentrate all his energies on gaining the summit, must determine that, whether he did well to embark on the enterprise or not, he will now that he has entered on it persevere to the very end and fullest extent of his powers; that, though there be weariness, discomfort, or suffering, he will not entertain the thought of turning back, so long as upward progress is possible. Yielding, even for a moment, is instinctively abhorrent to those who care for mountains, as in all likelihood it ever is to those who earnestly seek to be successful in achievements of real importance. The enjoyment then, in miniature, of the content which comes after a vigorous and successful struggle filled us that evening, though our self-complacent happiness was rather disturbed by one trifling matter. When starting on our journey, we had determined that each man should take up his bed and walk, that is, that we would carry our sleeping-bags on our own proper shoulders; but this good intention had gone to make a certain pavement, of which a great deal ought to be down by this time, and in practice we always gave our

bags to the porters, or put them on the horses. Now this evening our baggage was in charge of the chatter-boxes whom I had left on the hill-side, and it was exceedingly doubtful when they would appear, or whether they would appear at all that night. A lodging on the cold ground, especially if that ground is of a marshy character, is more pleasant in story than fact. Just as we were giving them up, however, two hours or so after I got in, the porters arrived, all the better apparently for their little talk, and still full of running—so far as conversation went.

We got up at daybreak next morning, and were soon on our way back to Urusbieh, passing through the beautiful woodlands, by the roaring stream, and catching again the wonderful glimpses of seemingly inaccessible peaks up the lateral glens. We stopped for a little while at one point on the road where there is a noble view of the western end of Tungsorun, which is to the upper valley of the Baksan what the Breithorn is to St. Nicolas Thal. After the wood came the rather dull meadow-land, crossing which we halted for a few moments at a farmhouse to pledge a cordial peasant in sour milk. His wife was pacing up and down the roof of the house gorgeous in a jacket of yellow silk, but his eldest daughter, a handsome child of twelve or thirteen years old, who came out with him, had so little on that I verily believe the Lord Chamberlain would have swooned dead at the sight of her, as Dante swooned at the sight of the Rimini. The

flowing, or I should rather say the curdling, bowl having been drained, we shook hands with the damsel's good-natured father and went on our way down the valley, passed over the old moraine, and reached Urusbieh at one o'clock.

The morning had been fine—at least, fine in the valley—but there was not the absolute serenity of the previous day. Fleecy clouds of no good augury were sailing across the sky at a sadly quick rate, which told of a strong wind in the high regions. Just before we reached Urusbieh a slight shower fell. It looked as if this was a turning day, and as if bad weather was at hand, but apparently it was fine enough for an ascent, and we trusted that Moore and his companions had reached the top of Elbruz while all was yet fair. The wind appeared to be increasing, however, and we were not without fear that they would suffer from it during the descent, for a high wind on a mountain like Elbruz might cause terrible cold.

The meek chief and the young prince had galloped on ahead of us, so there had been plenty of time for the villagers to get ready to resume their steady and minute observation of the strangers. The usual crowd poured into the house after us, and the curiosity was as intense as though we had just entered Urusbieh for the first time. In like manner we had found at Bezingi that absence seemed to make interest, if possible, keener. The villagers were excited about Elbruz, for the conversation was exceedingly lively, and again and again was

the word Minghi-Tau repeated. Presently a pleasant chief, whom we had not yet seen, came into the room to greet us. He was Mohammed, a younger brother of the elder Ismail, and one of the three princes of Urusbieh. He had returned during our absence. Like the rest of the village aristocrats, he was a very agreeable fellow, and he was a fine-looking man even for a Caucasian. He was extremely anxious to hear all about the great mountain, of which he seemed to know more than most of the men of Urusbieh did, although he had never attempted the ascent; but he did not stay long, for he saw, with a tact not always to be found among more civilised men, that we were tired and wanted to rest. Rising to go, he said with a 'graceful Oriental bend' to us, somewhat grubby after our expedition, and worthy, I should say, of small homage, 'I am much concerned that I was not here when you arrived; I should have begged you to honour me by coming to my house;' which was a pleasant speech at the least, and in all probability was sincere, for, like his two brothers, he is a genial and hospitable man.

The visit of this well-bred chief set me thinking on the strange character of the race we were amongst, of whom he was so good a specimen. A curious people they certainly are, these men of the north-western Caucasus, leading the most primitive of lives, and yet far, very far removed from barbarism; a simple pastoral race, to whom, albeit they were neither

foolish nor utterly ignorant, men from the busy West seemed well-nigh as strange as beings from another planet might to ourselves. A brief sketch of what struck a traveller as the characteristics of a people destined soon to yield to the monotony of civilisation, may not, I trust, be superfluous.

A very good people they are in many respects; their kindness and good temper, the complete absence among them of any dislike to, or suspicion of, strangers, cannot be too warmly praised, and should be fully appreciated by the traveller, who, if bored at times by their curiosity, may comfort himself fully by the reflection that he is very lucky in having nothing worse to complain of in so wild a country where travellers are rarer than sharks in the Channel. The genial hospitality and pleasant manners of the chiefs I have endeavoured to describe, and it may be hoped that the account of the strenuous efforts of the dear invisible princess of Bezingi in a miserably poor village and without her husband to help her, has shown how strong in the Caucasus are the traditions of what is due to guests, the influence of which was also very prettily made manifest in the anxiety of the young Ismail that the strangers should be well cared for. But more to be admired even than this gracious and honourable feeling is the total absence of theft and violence among these northern men, a matter indeed well worthy of note when the character of the tribes on the other side of the chain is considered. During the

time we were in the valleys of the North-Western Caucasus we had nothing stolen, and though our baggage was small in amount, there were things in it which must have been very tempting to the natives. As to danger from violence, I believe that there is none whatever among this people. It is true they still retain some of the habits of warlike days. The great poniard is almost invariably worn, and a pistol is sometimes carried ; but we never heard of the former being used for anything more murderous than killing a sheep, and it appeared to us that the latter was meant almost entirely for show. I witnessed several violent squabbles, but I never saw a man even go through the form of putting his hand to his dagger, and from what experience I had, and such knowledge as I could get of the Caucasians of the north-west, I believe them to be an altogether peaceful race, and, so far as abstinence from theft goes, perfectly honest.

It must not be imagined, however, that the country is an Arcadia, or that the traveller finds the golden age existing among these shepherds and hunters. In some matters the Caucasians are trying, and not by any means trustworthy. In the first place, they are painfully indolent. Strong, healthy men as most of them are, well capable of doing a long day's work without the slightest distress, it is wonderful how they loiter on a journey, and what frequent and protracted halts they make. Most irritating, too, is their procrastination. Very hard indeed is it to start a party

of Caucasian porters. One excuse after another is found for delay. As well an hour hence as now; as well this afternoon as this morning; as well to-morrow as to-day; such seem to be their ideas when it is a question of beginning a journey. Sometimes too, in a childish way, they tell the most silly lies for the sake of getting rid of their work for the moment; stopping, for instance, on a march when the afternoon is only half spent, and saying that the resting-place for the night has been reached. They know perfectly well that the day's stage rightly ends a good deal further on, and that the hours thus wantonly wasted will have to be made up for on the morrow; but this does not seem to trouble them in the least, so long as for the time being they can cease work.

In such transactions as the traveller has with the Caucasians—the hiring them as porters, the hiring horses, the buying provisions of them—they usually try to take advantage of him, and to charge him too much. It would be interesting, however, to hear of any people, civilised, semi-civilised, or savage, concerning whom the same could not be said. Man in all states loves to prey on his fellow-creatures. Books of travel tell of the greediness of the barbarian, and our newspapers often teem with declamation against the frauds of trade. It would be hard then to be severe on the poor Caucasian for seeking to get more than a fair price for his labour or his goods, as the practice is an extensive one. Overreaching, moreover, is not

often carried to a flagrant extent, and is never attempted by the chiefs.

With the villagers of one place—Utchkulan—we had considerable trouble, and the short description above given does not by any means apply to the good-for-nothing inhabitants of that place, who were indeed a sorry set of rogues ; but from what I saw and what I heard of the men of the North-Western Caucasus, I believe those of Utchkulan to be a dishonourable exception to the general type of native character, and that their conduct could not in any way be taken as an illustration of it.

It will be seen then that, though the Caucasians are not always to be relied on, and at times try the traveller's patience largely, the good much predominates in their character, and I think that those who have sojourned among them cannot fail to carry away a most pleasant remembrance of this simple pastoral race, untouched as yet for good or evil by the great forces of Western civilisation. Of the hospitality of chiefs I have before spoken. It was, to some extent, obligatory on them to aid us ; but at every place except Kunim they did not confine themselves to what they were compelled to do, but acted as zealous and generous hosts ; dilatory, it is true, and sometimes very slow in performing what they had promised ; but it is a country where no man takes any account of time.

The physical beauty of the Caucasians has often been extolled, and, as regards the men, we all thought

deservedly. As to the women, in a Mohammedan country the traveller's opportunities of observing are limited. The wives and daughters of the chiefs and of the rich men are never seen. Those of the poorer villagers wander about freely enough unveiled, and certainly do not seem remarkable for comeliness, so far as the dirt which they appear to affect rather more than the men allows one to judge; but no doubt they suffer from hard bodily labour, which, as is well known, mars feminine good looks terribly. Whether the greater ladies would show any of the proverbial beauty of an aristocracy, I cannot say. The only one I ever met turned her back on me the instant she saw me, which seemed ungracious of her, especially as it was in the dark; but no doubt she was a lady of very rigid principle, tenacious on points of etiquette, and ignorant that travellers are allowed to do very impertinent things, even to the gazing on a woman's face.

But that the males are proper men, must strike any one who visits the country. They have bold, strongly-marked features, often resembling the better kind of Jewish type—aquiline noses, fairly high foreheads, piercing dark eyes, usually but not invariably, dark hair and beard. Bodily too, they are well endowed. The proportion of tall, powerful men in a village is remarkable, and the gait of the North Caucasian has often that grace and elasticity which come from a well-strung and well-balanced frame. They are very spare in figure. I only remember seeing one fat man during

the whole time we were on the northern side, and he was a priest, and belonged therefore to what is in many countries a fat class. As has been previously said, it is to a diet composed principally of meat that the Caucasians probably owe their slimness of figure, which certainly greatly aids their appearance, a round-bellied man not looking well in the national costume, or indeed in any other, so far as I know.

Owing to the excessive indolence of the Caucasians, it is not very easy to form an opinion of their strength or power of endurance. Certainly Swiss porters who stopped as often as they do on a day's march would be regarded as very poor specimens of their race; but we were all of opinion that it was indolence and not want of strength which made the men halt so frequently. Once or twice, when they really wished to make a good stage, it was astonishing to see how well they walked and how little the work seemed to tell on them. In one matter, already spoken of in describing the march from Bezingi, the Caucasian's power of endurance is beyond that of the Swiss. Those who have travelled in the Alps know how much food the guides and porters require, and how, like English servants, they often knock up if they do not 'get their meals regular.' Now the Caucasians, though far removed from savages, have some of the savage's power of going without food. They can, if necessary, walk for the whole day with only a crust of bread to eat; nor do they seem exhausted or even specially hungry after

the work thus done fasting. For instance, two horse-drivers who were with us on the journey from Urusbieh to Utchkulan started without any breakfast, and went through twelve hours' hard walking with nothing to eat but a moderately sized piece of cheese. When we got to the resting-place for the night, they seemed by no means ravenous, getting us everything we wanted and chatting together until Paul had cooked for us and we had eaten. Then they proceeded in the most leisurely manner to get ready their own food, which they ate with a deliberation which a gastronome might have envied.

In judging of the Caucasians' powers, it has to be remembered that they are not much in the habit of walking long distances. All but the very poorest men have horses, and throughout the country the common way of making a journey is to ride. The inhabitants therefore are not by any means such practised walkers as those of the mountainous countries of Western Europe.

On the whole it appeared to me that the Caucasians, though often seeming weakly from their excessive indolence, were really very strong men, little if at all inferior in vigour to Highlanders or Swiss, and superior to both in their power of supporting prolonged exertion without food. The matter is of considerable interest, from the fact of the Caucasians drinking no spirituous liquor of any kind. If alcohol is altogether a bad thing for men, one potent enemy to healthy and prolonged life does not attack this race. Their diet,

which, as I have pointed out, has in it neither alcohol nor sugar, is certainly very different from what supports us in the West.

Allied to the question of diet is that of clothing, and in this the Caucasians appear in some degree to have united beauty and usefulness. The national costume is at once seemly to look at and pleasant to wear. Differing of course much in material, it is almost always the same in shape and arrangement, the principal and most characteristic garment being a long robe reaching below the knee, and having on the breast bandoleers for holding cases in which powder and ball are carried. If the wearer is rich, these cases, each of which holds one charge, are of silver. Underneath the robe are worn a short frock or blouse, and trousers very like knickerbockers, with which leggings, usually of light leather, are commonly worn. The shoes are very peculiar. They are made of thin leather or hide, and lace together under the foot, which they fit very easily, being stuffed with hay or grass when put on. The re-arrangement of this awkward stocking is a frequent pretext for stopping and dawdling on a march.

The hat is always a marked part of the Caucasian costume. There are many kinds, but that most commonly worn is made of a deep band of sheepskin or lambskin, with a cloth top. A hot and heavy head-piece it must be, but it is hardly ever removed, the natives, whether of high or low degree, not uncovering as a mark of respect, or even when entering a house.

Once or twice when we took our hats off to the chiefs they did the same to us, from a wish not to be behind-hand in good manners, but they did it awkwardly, and were obviously not accustomed to it as an act of courtesy. The Mohammedan Caucasians usually cut the hair very short or shave the head.

One distinctive garment remains to be described. That is the *burka*, or great mantle, a protection against rain and cold not surpassed to my mind by any of the numerous fabrics of the West. This admirable *capote* is in shape a large cloak, and is made, not as is sometimes said of sheepskin, but of thick, coarse felt, shaggy on the outside where the hairs are left loose so as to form a kind of fur. Hours of rain will not wet a *burka* through, as the water trickles off the furry outside, and the felt is so thick that a man can sleep out in his cloak without any fear of suffering from the damp of the ground, that insidious enemy which so often works evil to the hunter and the traveller in the night time. I am much inclined to believe myself that the vexed question of how to provide the soldier with a greatcoat which shall be warm and practically waterproof, without being oppressive, will be solved by using some fabric similar to that of the *burka*, and not by any adaptation of the unhealthy and unmanageable mackintosh. It should be said, however, that the weight of the *burka* is considerable.

Arms are almost always carried. Near Kutais, indeed, many of the natives did not wear the great poniard,

but nowhere on the northern side were the men without this weapon. It hangs from the centre of the waist, and must, one would think, be very troublesome when walking; but 'habit is ten times nature,' and what would drive Englishmen half mad does not cause the slightest inconvenience to Caucasians. They take great delight in handsome poniards, and the costliness of the weapon carried is frequently an indication of the social position of the wearer. A wealthy chief often has a poniard with a hilt and sheath of silver, beautifully ornamented with black inlaying. A villager of lower degree wears a less gorgeously mounted arm, and a poor man a perfectly plain one. The belt from which the poniard hangs is sometimes also of silver. These belts, which are made at Tiflis, are decorated with inlaid work similar to that on the hilts and sheaths, and, as mentioned when speaking of that place, are of considerable beauty. A pistol is worn sometimes, but not often, by the men in the northern valleys. A gun, however, is not unfrequently carried.

I must now return to my story, which has been left for a while to give the foregoing slight sketch of the Caucasians of the North, and I have to tell of the disappointment which befell us with regard to Elbruz. At about three in the afternoon, when, as we calculated, Moore and his companions ought to have been descending the lower slopes of the mountain on their return from the summit, Bernoff rode into the village, followed immediately afterwards by Kwitka. They

had, alas, a story of failure to tell, and of failure for that season not to be remedied. The brief history, as told by them, and by Moore on his arrival, was this. The two Russian officers, Moore, the two Caucasian chiefs, the hunter Achia, and Peter Knubel, left the camp at one in the morning for the ascent of Elbruz, the wind being of rather ominous strength, but the night clear. When they got to the edge of the great snow-field they saw that the two peaks of the mountain were veiled by what they took to be a cloud. Hoping that this might lift at dawn they went on, and trudged over the névé for about two hours, at the end of which time the Russian officers could struggle no longer against increasing exhaustion, and were obliged to stop and retreat. It was not the least astonishing that this should happen. Walking up snow-slopes at a great height is most fatiguing work, and constantly produces complete prostration in men unaccustomed to it. The Russian officers, admirable and fearless horsemen, able to keep in the saddle for fourteen or fifteen hours, were anything but practised walkers, and the exertion told on them so severely that at last they became utterly unable to go further on the upward course. They were therefore forced to turn back, while Moore, the Caucasians, and Peter Knubel continued the ascent. But inaccessible to all men was Minghi Tau on that day. As sunrise drew near the seeming cloud came further and further down the mountain's side, and when day broke Moore saw that it was no peace-

ful mist which veiled the peak, but a vast *tourmente* of snow, and that a furious storm was raging on the upper part of Elbruz. To the very edge of this *tourmente* he and the others went, but no human being could have ascended the mountain through it, and indeed any one who ventured far into it would very likely not come back again, so there was nothing for it but to give up the ascent and turn back, which, much disheartened, they did.

Strange to say, while this violent storm was lashing Elbruz, the rest of the chain was clear, and the explorers could see into the valleys beneath them, the bad weather being at the moment confined to the great mountain. Perhaps, owing to the height and exposed situation of Elbruz, more storms break on it than on the other peaks of the range. By the time they reached the valley the sky was overcast, and heavy rain fell before they arrived at Urusbieh. Moore, who came on foot, appeared a short time after Bernoff and Kwitka, and nothing now remained but to make preparations for a start early next morning, as owing to the small amount of time we had at our disposal it was impossible to make a second attempt on Minghi Tau. One of the horsemen who had come with us from Kunim was willing to go with us as far as Utchkulan, and another man and horse were hired in the village, so we hoped to get off by daylight, and bore with fortitude the stare of the crowd who were taking a last 'longing lingering look' at us.

In the evening the pleasant Mohammed came in for a farewell talk, and with the courtesy common to his family, earnestly begged us to come to Urusbieh again. 'There is much to see near this valley,' he said, 'and plenty of game at no great distance from here. Between Suenetia and the Karatchai country there lies a mighty forest, the most wonderful I have ever seen. The trees are huge, and the flowers, which in places altogether cover the ground, are of the greatest beauty. Then the forest is full of game. There are deer, wild boar, bouquetin, and chamois,¹ all in plenty. A good hunter can kill much game there easily. Two or three men from here usually go over to hunt there during the summer season.'

Myself.—Are there any people or houses there?

Mohammed.—None whatever. The country is altogether without population. Anything that a man requires to live on besides the game he kills, he must take with him. You would much admire the forest, which is indeed a magnificent one.

What a picture this was! A huge primeval forest, full of beauty, and also full of game; surely a place where one might lead an ideal hunter's life, going on, day after day, through the endless vistas of great trees, seeing no man save a few trusty followers, and enjoying the wonderful solitude of the forest, while a number of wild animals would meet with a less

¹ We saw no chamois ourselves in the Caucasus, but probably they exist there in large numbers.

peaceful end than they might reasonably have expected. As to the exact position of these great woodlands we were, I am sorry to say, left in some doubt. Mohammed's description was, as has been seen, vague in this respect. He spoke of them as being between Suenetia and the Karatchai country, but these two districts are separated by the main chain, and I could not, owing to the difficulties which always attend interpretation, clearly make out in further talk with him whether the forest lay on the northern or southern slopes of the mountains. A snow pass had to be crossed to reach it, but this might be either over the spur connecting Elbruz with the main chain, or over the main chain itself. It was clear, however, that the woodlands could be reached with little difficulty from Urusbieh, and from a careful examination of the map after this conversation with Mohammed I am convinced that he was speaking of the valleys of the country west of the Upper Ingur, a land apparently uninhabited and covered by a mighty forest. It is to be hoped that before long some traveller to the Western Caucasus will venture into these beautiful solitary woodlands, which should be as interesting to the explorer as they seem full of promise to the hunter.

But our attention was presently distracted from Mohammed's wonderland by a question more delicate even than that of position and boundary. We had been the guests, first of the meek chief of the village,

and then of the elder and greater brother, and we had eaten largely of their bread and meat, and drunk many bumpers of their sour milk, and of course we could not be content here any more than in other places with merely thanking our hosts for their good cheer. We wished to recompense them so that they might lose nothing by their kindness, but they were greater men than any who had yet entertained us, and how to make payment troubled us sore. If an Englishman, after staying at a country-house, had to make a gift, not to the butler but to the host, he would probably feel rather shamefaced over the task, and would strongly wish that he had a case of wine, or a gun, or a retriever to give, rather than the actual coin. In a similar embarrassing position we feared much that the chiefs might dislike taking money, and that they would be not a little hurt if the whole payment was made in cash; but unhappily we had scarcely anything to offer, except what is generally so much liked; for we had limited our baggage to the smallest possible quantity, not thinking that it would be necessary to bring any gifts with us. After a time, however, we succeeded in forming a kind of composite present. Moore sacrificed his revolver. To this were added a couple of eight-bladed knives and some roubles. We trusted that the two first gifts might veil the offensiveness of the last. But it was not so, as we found when the chiefs came in to say good-bye, and Paul for us bespoke them:—

Paul.—My masters bid me thank you much for your kindness in giving them lodging and providing for them so well. They are deeply indebted to you, and will ever remember your goodness. They ask you to accept these things as tokens of their regard for you.

The Chief.—We have been very happy to have the gentlemen among us, and we require no recompense for what we have done for them. It is not our custom to take money from those whom we have entertained. What we have given has been given from friendliness, and not for payment. If your masters like to make us any gifts by which we may remember their visit here, we shall be glad to receive them, for we indeed esteem your masters our friends, and it would be a pleasure to us to keep their gifts in remembrance of them and of their stay with us; but we would rather not take any money. It is not our custom to do so.

Paul.—The gentlemen are very grateful to you for your kindness. They know that their visit here has given you great trouble; that your servants have had more work than usual, and that you have had to send about for provisions. They therefore beg you to accept in addition to the gifts this money, not in any way as payment, but to prevent you from being losers by what you have done.

The Chief.—We had rather not take money. It is not our custom to receive payment from our friends.

Obviously they thought it very undignified, but

finally we succeeded in getting them to accept the despised roubles, as our presents were not enough to repay them for what they had done for us, and after the way in which we had ransacked their stores, it would have been hard indeed to have left them poorly requited. When this delicate matter was at last arranged, the elder and greater brother said good-bye to Moore in a graceful farewell speech. 'If you should come here again,' said he, 'remember that your dwelling is in my house, which is yours; that I am ever your friend, and that I look on you as my brother.' And then, very sorry to see the last of them, we shook hands with the kindly and hospitable chiefs who had been such good hosts to us during our stay in pleasant Urusbieh.

CHAPTER X.

THE GREEN COUNTRY NORTH OF ELBRUZ.

Departure from Urusbieh—A useless horse—The valley of the Kwirik—Bad weather—Singular glen—A shepherd's camp—Caucasian dogs—A primitive tent—Bitter bread a luxury—The camp at nightfall—Start next morning—Head waters of the Malka—The eagles—Volcanic mounds—The great rolling down north of Elbruz—A salt spring—The farewell of our Kunim follower—Religious feeling of the man of Urusbieh—Col at the end of the great down—The track lost—The valley of the Khudes-Su—Deserted châteaux.

THE next morning (July 30) was fine, although light clouds were traversing the sky with ominous quickness. After saying good-bye to the Russian officers, who were staying at Mohammed's house and got up early to see us off, we left the village at seven o'clock, and made for the valley of the Kwirik, which for some distance from Urusbieh lies, roughly speaking, north by west and south by east. We had with us two baggage horses, one driven by the excellent fellow who had come with us from Kunim, and the other by a sturdy Urusbieh man, who had been one of the porters to the camp at Elbruz, and had taken at least his full share of the work. The journey to Utch-kulan, whither we were now bound, would, we had

been told, require two days on horseback, between two and three on foot.

The glen through which we had gone to ascend Sultra unites with the valley of the Kwirik a very short distance above Urusbieh, and after passing the point of junction our path ran for some distance nearly level, the valley rising but little. At this very early stage of the walk an untoward incident compelled a halt. The horse belonging to the man of Kunim had in some way misused his period of idleness at Urusbieh, and by stopping every twenty paces or so showed unmistakeably that he was not likely to carry his very moderate load to Utchkulan. We had therefore to wait while the native of Urusbieh went back to the village for another man and horse, which he succeeded in getting with wonderful quickness. Our new follower was a tall, very handsome old man, whose striking appearance was not a little increased by his wearing a monster of a pistol, some two feet long, which was exceedingly picturesque, though as I afterwards found it was a little difficult to use, as it took ten minutes to load, and then could only be made to go off by lighting a large fire and putting it in the middle. Still it was a very nice pistol in some respects. Although we had been obliged to take a substitute in the place of our friend from Kunim, the latter went on with us, remarking, quite sincerely I believe, that he liked us, and should be very glad to be of use to us in any way he could; 'besides,' he can-

didly added, 'I have relations in the Karatchai whom I should like to see, and who I daresay will do something for me.' So, keeping this excellent retainer still with us, we started again.

The valley grew very narrow as we ascended it, and the path for some distance lay by the side of the stream. We passed a house in process of building—not a very common sight in the Caucasus—and after walking by the water for some way, found the valley open out again, and its proportions become much greater. It was excessively ugly; a huge, monotonous green vale. There were no signs of hut or *châlet* in the dull hollow, but cattle were grazing in places, and it is no doubt one of the pastures of *Urushieh*. Probably the cheery inhabitants of that village come to this dreary seclusion as little as they can.

We followed the path up the valley until we came to a place where it turned towards the west, another great valley opening out of it at the elbow on the northern side. Up this latter vale our way lay, so we entered it and laboured up the track leading to its head, through scenery so dismal and barren as hardly to have any grandeur, although the proportions of the valley were vast. The sides were lofty and steep, dull grass in the lower part, dull red rock in the upper. The col at the head was of great height, but when we reached it after a toilsome march we could see nothing of the country round, for we were enveloped in thick mist and sleet. We did not therefore tarry

long on the saddle, the view being one with which we had been familiar in the earlier part of our expedition, but began the descent at once, going at first over bare and stony slopes, and then over some grass-land, shortly after reaching which we shot out of the mist, but found heavy rain falling.

We had descended into a huge trench-like valley with steep green sides, a strange glen enough, not to be called beautiful, but far less forbidding than that which we had just quitted. Below us the base of the great trough seemed to run nearly level, and along it meandered a pleasant stream. As we went down the vale became more pleasing, and there was a pretty vista up a lateral glen, in which was a little woodland. As in other parts of the Caucasus, the scenery had some resemblance to that of the Highlands, though of course it was on a far grander scale. After going rapidly down the steep upper part of the valley, we walked for some distance along the meadow-land of its base beside the stream, speculating with considerable interest where we should pass the night. Travellers ought to be perfectly indifferent to sleeping out in the rain, but then, like other men, travellers are not always exactly what they ought to be, and I believe that in practice they generally get shelter if they can. The men of Urusbieh had spoken earlier in the day of shepherds who might have some cover to offer, but now when asked about them they pointed to a narrow and very steep gorge on our left, and said that we

should probably find them there, after an ascent of two or three thousand feet; the fact being that they had not the slightest idea where the shepherds might be, and pointed out the glen on much the same principle as a conjuror acts on when he asks if any of the audience would like to swallow a sword. Disregarding therefore advice not meant to be taken, we went on, but the porters presently got greatly bored with the walking, and with true Caucasian indifference to the morrow's labour, strove to make us stop much before the proper time at what they called a cavern, which was, in fact, a small space under a projecting rock, where perhaps one man might make himself comfortable. Spurning the idea of stopping here, to the great wrath of the bearer of the pistol, who made me a long speech on the subject in his native language, to which I replied with such rhetoric as I could command in my own, we went on, and were reconciling ourselves to the idea of a damp night, when we saw a small tent in the distance on the further side of the stream. It belonged to the shepherds whom we had little hoped to see, and although to use it we should have to persuade the rightful occupants to turn out and pass the night in the open with the rain falling, we had little doubt of the influence of roubles on the pastoral mind, and assumed, rightly enough as it proved, that to sleep on the hill-side in the wet would not seem a monstrous hardship to a Karatchai shepherd. Extreme modesty in asking a favour is a little out of place in men

travelling through a wild country. We made straight for the tent, crossing the stream, and repelling with some difficulty a savage charge of unusually excited dogs, who bayed vigorous disapprobation as we cajoled the shepherd into yielding us his wigwam. Is there not a Mohammedan superstition that the souls of the departed sometimes enter the bodies of animals? I cannot help thinking that Mussulman prejudice, of which we found so little among the men of the Caucasus, had concentrated itself in their evil-minded hounds. I am glad to say that one of these curs supped that night off an old strap which was thrown away, and that he was very ill next morning in consequence. The tent which was given up to us was scarcely a luxurious resting-place, for it was entirely open on one side, and exactly resembled one of those small booths for the sale of food which are common at fairs, and are still to be seen in some parts of London. It was made of bits of old *burka* stretched on a rough framework. We afterwards found that tents of this kind are generally used by the wandering shepherds of the Karatchai, giving as much shelter as the hardy fellows require. Placed with the open side to leeward they answer fairly well unless the wind changes; then, if there is rain, it is driven in on the inmates, but of that they take their chance with true Caucasian indifference to so trifling a matter. On this evening, when there certainly was rain enough, the shepherd made small difficulty about turning out for us

on being promised a reward. He had two lads with him, his sons probably, and the three soon made a roaring fire, and in company with our men passed apparently a very cheerful evening, much aided by a small gift we sent them, their delight at which certainly illustrated in a remarkable way their exceedingly primitive life. The offering was made in return for a present of theirs which was very grateful to us, the exchange coming about thus : as we were walking along beside the little river, it struck us that in the Highlands such a stream would undoubtedly have trout in it, and that it was difficult to see why it should not in the Caucasus. After we had settled down in the tent, and the shepherds had brought forth good store of butter and cheese, we caused Paul to ask them if to these good things they could not add some fish, whereupon they produced four or five as pretty little trout as ever rewarded the thrashing of a stream. Afterwards Paul said to us that the shepherds had given us the best they had, and that it would please them much if we gave them some bread in return ; ‘ for,’ he said, ‘ they hardly ever get bread when they are on the hills.’ What we had with us was poor, stale stuff, as bitter as friendly advice ; but of course we gave it to them, and delighted they were with it. Men to whom bad bread is a great luxury must certainly be living in a very simple way. The fish which were given us were worth remembering, for they were the only fresh ones we saw in the Northern Caucasus. There must be plenty in

the streams, but the inhabitants seem content to leave them there.

It would be difficult to conceive anything more perfectly typical of pastoral life than the scene we gazed on that evening. A huge flock of sheep, some white, some black, had been driven in and gathered round the encampment as night came on. A little further off, on the other side of the stream, a great herd of cattle darkened the grass-slopes. The watchful dogs, having bitten and worried the laggard and the adventurous of the flock into conformity, crouched near their masters, who were making merry over bitter bread before a roaring fire. Around the little nook in the valley thus for the moment occupied all was solitude. Men might wander among these hills for days and not come to a human habitation, perhaps not meet a human being. Next morning the camp would be deserted. The shepherds with their flocks and herds would go on a little way and then camp again, straying thus over hill and dale during the summer months. A life more simple and primitive it would be hard to find. Has it changed much since the days when Mithridates sought Dioscurias, and Roman galleys rode on the Euxine?

The next morning was a doubtful one, though the rain had ceased during the night. We were up at daybreak and said good-bye to the genial shepherds, who were so well satisfied with what we had paid them for the food they had given us and for their night in the open, that I believe they prayed that other hungry

travellers might come to them in bad weather. After going over the stream by a bridge which we found a little below the encampment, we almost immediately struck up the left bank of the valley, and after mounting a shoulder descended into another valley, steep-sided and high, with a disproportionately small stream running along its base. It seemed strange to think that this insignificant rivulet was one of the sources of the powerful Malka, the other being the pretty stream by which we had camped the night before. Descending to the floor of the valley and crossing the rivulet, we entered to the west of it another valley, over the northern bank of which we passed. As we were making our way up this, I was interested in watching some eagles flying at a vast height above us. They were sailing round and round in that monotonous, weary-looking rotary flight which they will continue for hours, and, as in the Tcherek gorge, were suggestive, when one looked at them, not of the majestic enjoyment of their mighty powers of flight which is poetically attributed to them, but rather of frightful boredom, if such a word can be applied to birds. We saw an unusually large number of great eagles during the morning. After passing over the side of the valley our way lay across undulating grass-land, the beginning of a vast rolling down, crossing which occupied the greater part of the day. The singular mountain steppe which we thus traversed struck us as being in some respects the strangest country we saw while journeying

through the Caucasian highlands ; but before attempting to describe it, I should say a few words respecting some curious conical mounds which we passed when beginning our march over the wide down. There were several of them, and they were of considerable height and of wonderfully regular conical shape. One indeed was so symmetrical that it seemed hard not to think it the work of hands, and our men would not believe us when we told them that it was not artificial, saying that it was absolutely impossible that a natural hillock could be so evenly moulded. It was only when, on drawing near, we pointed out to them the size of the grassy cone, which may have been four times that of the Great Pyramid or thereabouts, that they saw that making the mound must have been rather a big job, and admitted that nature had done the work ; but their surprise was great, and certainly these hillocks were a curious sight. They were clearly of volcanic origin. To that only could be attributed their peculiar and regular form, and it was to be remembered that we were now skirting, though at a considerable distance, the sometime volcano Elbruz. It would have been very pleasant to have settled that these were the vast burial mounds of some extinct race ; but so to describe them would be to exceed a little even a traveller's license.

The great rolling down on which we were now entering is a singular tract of country, utterly unlike anything to be found in the Alps. It is an extensive plateau lying at the foot of the hills which rise imme-

diately under Elbruz, and consists of a wide extent of undulating pasture land, marked at intervals by shallow ravines, scarcely to be called valleys, down which little streams flow. The scenery, though not of the kind which can be rightly called beautiful, is grand and striking. If the expression may be allowed, it is original in the highest degree, and in places the views are fine, the hills to the north being admirably seen, while Elbruz is probably visible on the other hand in fine weather; but as to this we were literally left in the dark, for to the south there was nothing but mist and gloom. Strange to say, the plateau struck us as having a certain resemblance to the Southdowns as they were before cultivation spoilt them, when they had a strongly marked character of their own; it need hardly be said that there is a vast difference in scale. On the magnificent pastures of this great plateau large flocks, many herds of oxen, and some of horses, feed during the summer months.

Shortly after entering it we came to a shepherd's tent, exactly resembling that under which we had slept the night before. Close to it was a cart, which though not in itself a very beautiful object, being of the roughest possible make, we regarded as a sign of a return to civilisation. In this, as it afterwards turned out, we were a little premature. The shepherd was a civil fellow enough, and we bought from him for the Caucasians of our party some coarse cream-cheese, which was the only food they ate during the day. Going on

after a short halt we tramped over the grass-land, until we got to one of the small ravines intersecting the down, where we came upon a very curious sight. At the point where we struck the ravine is a salt spring of considerable volume. The cattle which pasture on the country round are periodically brought to drink of this, and at the time when we were passing a large herd had just been driven down to take their medicine. Unlike human creatures, they showed the greatest desire for it. The spring has been made by the herdsmen into a small pond, and to get at this the beasts fought and struggled with each other as eagerly and angrily as Englishmen do to see a bad actor. Those who had been fortunate enough to get to the water, seemed as if they would drink the pond dry, such long pulls were they taking of the beloved brine. Leaving the little valley we ascended a gentle slope, where we passed the skeleton of a horse, and then after a time came to another mild descent, at the end of which we had one of our usual engagements with dogs, who after the fashion of wicked Caucasian animals did not fight fair. One of them indeed nearly succeeded in giving a laggard of our party a bite, which would have inflicted on him an injury such as the lady in *Candide* suffered from, and, like an election petition, have effectually prevented him from taking his seat. Beating them off we ascended another gentle incline, at the top of which we had to go through a solemn leave-taking, for we found with much regret that we were

now to say good-bye to the worthy fellow who had come with us from Kunim. He had discovered two brothers at a shepherd's camp near which we passed, and they were able to promise him employment; so he determined to stop with them, there being no reason why he should go with us to Utchkulan. Originally hired only for the journey to Urusbieh, he had remained with us until now, partly no doubt to make a little money, but also, I think, because he had taken a liking to the strangers with whom he was journeying. I am afraid I shall seem to state what is utterly incredible, when I say that a traveller may possibly find among the Caucasians of the north what most men sadly regard a *mirage* of youth, to wit, a disinterested liking from inferiors. When I heard during the earlier part of our journey, that a man who was with us for a time said that he loved us as his brothers, I only wondered, as one would in Switzerland or Italy, what swindle he was meditating; but later on I became convinced that the expression, if exaggerated, was not utterly insincere; and that not only were the chiefs hospitable from kindness and self-respect, but that good feeling without the hope of gain was not impossible among the humbler men. On this occasion we all thought that our Kunim friend was grieved at having to say farewell, as in a melancholy manner he shook hands with each man, and said that we had behaved well to him, and that he was sorry to leave us. The last we saw of him he was sitting

motionless on his horse, watching as long as he could the travellers, serving whom had been grateful to him.

We were speedily diverted from any indulgence in sentiment by a squabble amongst our men, which, of smallest importance in itself, was remarkable as evoking the only sign of Mohammedan intolerance which was observed during the journey. Paul was telling the younger of the two Urusbieh men to make some alteration in the burden of one of the horses, when the elder man interfered, and said that no change was necessary. Paul tartly but naturally replied by bidding him mind his own business; whereat the religious and personal pride of the son of Urusbieh were roused, and turning on Paul, he cried out with more vehemence than relevance, 'Who are you that you should speak to me thus? Nothing but a miserable Christian forsooth. I am a true believer and a son of a true believer, while you are an infidel, and a son of —' but Paul here advanced towards the speaker in so threatening a manner, that '*la recherche sur la parenté*' came to an abrupt end, and the quarrel might have become a very pretty one had not the younger man interfered. Subsequently, having found out what was the matter, we made peace between the two with some little trouble, and the march was continued without any further difficulties on the score of religious precedence. An easy dip and rise brought us to a huge expanse of grass-land, the biggest field of the

great down. We had now crossed three shallow valleys or ravines, between which the ground rose and fell slightly, making a series of gentle cols, and in front of us the prairie again rose a little, so that there was another of these to be passed, but at a considerable distance from us. We made our way towards it at a very easy pace, stopping often to look at this strange mountain country, so different from any we had before seen. To the north were many ranks of green hills, and in the far distance was a long irregular rocky rampart rising on the northern side of some great valley, or series of valleys, a barrier which I had seen from Elbruz, but had not been able to identify on the map; to the south, heights of which the summits were wrapped in cloud rose above the prairie. On the flanks of these, and on the great steppe itself, flocks and herds were grazing, and some way up the slopes we could see a shepherd's camp, round which were a great number of sheep and oxen. As at our halting-place the night before, everything told of the most simple pastoral life. I doubt not that if we could have thrown time back for a thousand years, we should have found on this line of travel wandering shepherds little different from those we saw that day scattered in the same way on the hill-side and on the steppe. Perhaps we did see one sign of a life some thousand years gone, for while crossing the last bit of the prairie we came to a singular monument, a roughly-hewn pillar of

granite, about eight or nine feet high. There was no description or device of any kind upon it, and one of the party irreverently suggested that it had been put there for cattle to rub themselves against. It may have been so, but I have small belief in the Caucasian herdsmen's taking such trouble for their beasts.

On reaching the top of the very gentle col we found that there was a yet higher one beyond it, the ground between being more broken than that which we had lately been traversing; but it was easy walking enough, and when we arrived at the highest saddle we looked on to a very noble country on both sides. It is possible that this col marks the watershed between the Black Sea and the Caspian.

Descending rapidly we came to a *châlet*, the first building we had seen since the half-finished one in the valley above *Urusbieh*. There came forth to greet us two men, three wives, and a corresponding number of children, all indescribably dirty, but good-tempered as dirty people often are. They smiled pleasantly on us, and as we were in some doubt about the path, told us the way, quite wrongly it is true, but I believe with the best possible intentions.

After leaving the *châlet* our course lay through a richer country than that which we had hitherto traversed, and we came presently to a small forest where with great promptitude we lost our way. We wandered about for a time in the dripping underwood,

with that alternate energy and vacillation which mark men who have got off the path, until Moore, with a mountaineer's sagacity, hit off the true line from which our two Urusbieh followers who were hopelessly bewildered were straying further and further. It is a peculiarity of mountain walking that, if the track has been lost, it always turns out to be a long way above one when found again, and in this case we had a heavy pull up a hill-side to regain the right path. Our day's work, however, was nearly at an end, for a short walk took us on to the slopes of the northern bank of the valley through which run the upper waters of the river Khudes-Su. Descending these slopes for a short distance we came to a group of deserted châteaux, and at them our march for that day ended. It was pleasant to find shelter for the night, as the weather looked threatening and the cold was likely to be considerable, but nevertheless there was something very melancholy in these empty huts. They had obviously been occupied at no very distant time, and we tried to find out from the Urusbieh men whether they thought that the dwellings were permanently deserted, or that the inhabitants had merely driven their cattle to the high pastures for the summer months, but neither of our two followers could tell us anything. A certain amount of emigration is going on from the Caucasus, and we feared much that the owners of these châteaux had left their valley never to return; but wherever the poor wanderers might be, we treated

their dwellings with as much respect as though they were to come back on the morrow, rather to the disgust of our men, who looked upon the interior woodwork as an excellent and immediately available supply of firewood.

CHAPTER XI.

UTCHKULAN.

A beautiful Alp—Rapacious herdsmen—The valley of the Kuban—Eltiub—Position of Utchkulan—Cold reception by the Chief—The Russian clerk—Change on the part of the Chief—Utchkulan beer—Attempt to get porters for the Nakhar Pass—An unlucky offer—Exorbitant demands—A difficult position—Arrival of a Russian Colonel—Marriage festivities at Utchkulan—Porters found for us by the Chief—His responsibilities as banker to the peasants round—Departure from Utchkulan—Strictness of our followers in prayer—A too early halt—A quarrel over a sheep—The wrath of the men of Utchkulan.

THE dawn of next day, which was the 1st of August, promised well for the month, as there was every sign of fair weather, and cheered apparently by this our Caucasians dawdled less than usual, so that we got off soon after daybreak. Descending rapidly to the base of the vale we walked by the side of the stream through a beautiful wood, until we reached the place where the valley opened into another running at right angles to it. Crossing this we mounted through the broken light and shade of a great forest of pines, and came presently to a little alp as beautiful as any I can remember to have seen in the course of many mountain wanderings. It was a small, perfectly level meadow of

the brightest emerald green, surrounded partly by the noble forest, partly by bold and lofty hills. On one side of it lay a dark tarn, and at a short distance the smoke rising from a group of *châlets* gave that pleasant suggestion of life without which there is a certain coldness in the fairest scene of meadow and woodland. The brilliant and beautiful hue of the grass, which was like water in the desert to us after the dull turf which had so long surrounded us, was owing, I believe, to the fact that what was now a field had, at no very remote time, been a lake, and hence the intense green of the carpet which covered this little oasis in the hills.

The spirit of man was certainly not divine in this beautiful place, for the inhabitants were an example of the extremely disagreeable character of the people amongst whom we were now coming. Paid very liberally for some milk and curds which our men got from them, these fellows grumbled a good deal. This may not seem a very remarkable thing in travel, but it struck us, as we had constantly got the same things from shepherds and dwellers in isolated *châlets*, and had always found them perfectly satisfied with what we paid them. Sometimes they seemed surprised at being paid at all, for it is, I think, the custom of the natives to give freely of their acid drink to wayfarers; but we were now amongst a grasping and dishonest tribe.

We journeyed on again for a time through the wood, and then coming out of it, and passing round a

huge shoulder by a well-contrived path, entered the valley of the Kuban at a great height on its eastern side. For some distance the path ran nearly level, this course being necessary to carry it over the upper part of a bold promontory. The mighty valley beneath was admirably seen from the track. On one side the vast bank was broken by great spurs and lateral glens, while opposite, the huge slopes, if less varied, were grand and striking from their steepness and vast size. Through the wide meadows of the valley's base rushed the Kuban, a powerful stream even at this early stage in its long course.

After passing high up round a portion of the promontory, we descended by a series of sharp zigzags its partly-wooded southern side into a lateral glen of some beauty, a short walk down which took us into the great valley. This we struck a little above the village of Eltiub, the largest we had yet seen in the Northern Caucasus, and possessing amid the native huts a house built after the Western fashion, which, though a poor dwelling enough, looked there a palace. In the middle of the village rose a large red-roofed building, which we decided to be a mosque, principally on the ground that there must be a mosque somewhere in a Mohammedan country, and that we had come to none yet. We desired no commerce with Eltiub, as Utchkulan was our goal, so we turned our faces to the south, and marched along the Czar's highway, for a highway it was, and indeed a very fair one, which led

up the valley of the Kuban. The valley itself, though it had been very striking when much of it was seen from high up on the slopes, was not beautiful when seen more in detail from below, and near Utchkulan it was exceeding dull, the barren slopes being monotonous in colour and form. The level base of the valley was of great width, and was largely cultivated, oats being apparently the favourite crop.

About an hour along the high road brought us to Utchkulan, a straggling village situated in the wide space where the valley of the Khursukh opens into that of the Kuban. The village is placed in the angle formed by the junction of these two rivers, standing on the right bank of the former and the left bank of the latter. The dwellings appeared to be the ordinary Caucasian hovels, with the exception of one, which was apparently of Russian construction, and belonged, as we learnt, to an unhappy clerk employed to interpret for the chief of Utchkulan. We knocked at the clerk's door, but he was not at home, or, as is more probable, thought we were scamps, and would not open; and it was some time before we could find the chief, whose house was in the dirtiest part of the dirty village. He was a short man making the most of himself, as short people are apt to do, and I remember that I formed an evil opinion of him from what I thought his singularly forbidding expression. I was utterly wrong, as men almost always are when they attempt to judge from physiognomy.

Our reception was exceedingly cold. Paul invested us with as much consequence as he could, and presented the Russian letter, but the chief seemed to look with suspicion both on the letter and on ourselves. I imagine it was the old difficulty of reconciling our travelling on foot with our being anything but vagabonds; but whatever it may have been, the great man seemed little disposed to give himself any trouble about us. In answer to Paul he said very coldly that he must wait for the arrival of the Russian clerk to interpret the letter to him; 'but,' he added, 'if the travellers want a room, they can have this,' pointing to a place which looked like a compromise between a coal-cellar and a pig-stye. This we contemptuously refused, and strange to say our doing so impressed him favourably. Humble tramps, such as travel on foot in the Caucasus, would, I suppose, have been only too glad of any shelter, and when we would none of his black hole, it seemed to occur to the chief that we were better than we looked. He took us to a very good room—his own, as we afterwards found—which had the luxury of a boarded floor, and here we waited under the watchful eyes of the inevitable crowd until the Russian clerk came. To explain the functions of this person, I should say that the chief with whom we were now dealing, Tokmak Akbaief by name, was a man of no small importance, being chief not only of the village but of the country round, and having duties involving considerable responsibility entrusted to him

by the Government. He was, however, wholly ignorant of the Russian language, and the business of the clerk was to write and translate official letters for him. The chief now desired to have the Tiflis document explained to him by his own man, as I fear he distrusted Paul's rendering of it.

He was a poor, sallow creature, this clerk, looking as if he lived on spermaceti, and for some time after he arrived he was paralysed with terror lest we should attempt to quarter ourselves on him. 'It is the chief's business to receive you, not mine, not mine,' he kept saying in the most abject fear of being put to expense; but we succeeded at last in persuading him that he was in no pecuniary danger, and then with the assistance of the village surgeon, a smart young fellow, apparently a native, he translated the letter to Tokmak Akbaief.

I have carefully described our greeting by that worthy, because it showed strongly how little one ought to be dismayed in the Caucasus by a cold reception. A kinder or more hospitable host than we afterwards found this chief could not be desired. A staid Mussulman, he made no sign when the letter was read to him and its authenticity made certain, but it was not long before we saw that his estimation of us was altered. 'Le thé d'honneur' flowed freely. A plump lamb was slain; but better than either of these offerings was a promise from the chief that he would set to work at once to get us porters for our passage

to the south side of the chain, and he shortly sent a messenger through the village to find eight able-bodied men for the work. Not content with these good deeds, the hospitable man took great pains to make the room as comfortable as he could, and becoming more and more genial, he produced as the best thing he could give us, a jug of beer, a most rare luxury in the Caucasus. It is ill to look a gift-horse in the mouth, or to seem to find fault with an admirable host, but I cannot help telling my recollection of that beer, as it was the only alcoholic drink of any kind that we found on the northern side of the chain. Sir Wilfrid Lawson would hardly have complained of the strength of the fluid, for it may perhaps have contained about one per cent. of alcohol, and six gallons would therefore be the smallest possible quantity a man could take with any reasonable prospect of getting drunk. Now no man would be likely to drink six gallons of this, if he could get it (which he couldn't), for in taste it was like exceedingly bad French beer drawn a couple of days before, and I think that it must have seemed to any native who drank it for the first time very much what still champagne or white truffles seem to most Englishmen, a rare and expensive form of nastiness. A rarity and expensive it certainly was, however, and if Tokmak Akbaief's beer was not nice, very real was his hospitality in offering it.

Remarkable indeed was the change which had come over him since his cold and distrustful greeting

of us. This was no doubt in part due to the respect for the Russian order, but much more, I think, to real kindness and generosity. He had some doubts whether we were not vagabonds when he first saw us, but he followed zealously the traditions of Mohammedan hospitality now that he was convinced we were fit to be his guests. So far as he was concerned, all was done for us birds of passage that could be done. But the people he ruled by no means resembled him, as we found when we came to settle the rate of payment with the men who were to go with us as porters. What happened is worth describing, as showing how very imprudent it is for a traveller in a wild country to let it be seen that he is pressed for time, even when he has some reason to trust those around him.

As explained in the first chapter of this book, our route from Utchkulan lay across the main chain by the Nakhar pass, and then down the valleys of the Klütch and Kodor to the Russian post at Lata, where we should be within two days' march of Soukhoun Kaleh and the sea. What we required then at Utchkulan were men to cross the Nakhar, and go as far as Lata with us. That the pass to the other side of the chain was easy we were nearly certain, but we were doubtful whether the whole journey to Lata would require three or four days, and we were very anxious to make it if possible in the shorter time in order to be quite sure of the steamer. The chief told us that three days would be enough, and, rejoicing in this information, we went

forth to settle matters with the porters ; but, alas, we found there was to be much oratory on the subject, to the exclusion, as in most countries, of honesty and fair-dealing.

There was a small crowd outside the house, among whom were eight fellows who had said they would go with us if properly paid. To them Paul offered a rouble and a half ($4s. 1\frac{1}{2}d.$) a day for each man. This was what we had hitherto paid, and we had always found the natives perfectly content with it, which was not astonishing, seeing that it was about three times the ordinary price of a day's labour in the country ; but now we had fallen among thieves. A tall, powerful fellow, with an evil expression, came forth as spokesman, and freeing his right arm from the folds of his huge *burka* for that action which we know on great authority to be the soul of oratory, delivered himself thus : ' Our time is very valuable. We are getting in the harvest, and if we lose this fine weather and wet comes on, we shall be in evil plight. (Then came from the crowd the Caucasian equivalent for " hear, hear.") This is a big journey. With going and coming we shall be away for a long space, leaving our crops ungathered. Then we must take provisions, which will cost us much. We must have two roubles a day, and that will requite us very ill. We would rather not go at all, but we wish to behave well to those who are strangers in our country.' (Hear, hear.) The speaker then went on at considerable length, but Paul's abridg-

ment of the latter part of his discourse was, that he was saying the same thing over again with a great many lies in addition.

There was some truth, however, in his statements about the harvest, so we bade Paul say that we would pay the porters two roubles a day if they would promise to get to Lata in three days—*i. e.*, that they were to have six roubles each for the whole journey. We imagined that this would tempt them, but we could not have made a more unfortunate offer. I was close to the large scamp when Paul translated it to him, and I saw on his swarthy face a momentary look of triumph, such as may sometimes be seen on the countenance of a whist-player when he has succeeded in drawing from an adversary the precise card he wanted. Shortly there came another long speech, the purport of which was that though an unburdened man might do the journey in three days, one carrying a load could not; but that, however this might be, the men would not go for six roubles. They must be promised eight roubles apiece, or they stirred not from Utchkulan. We had to promise this as they were obstinate, and then at last they undertook to come with us; so, thinking that the bargain was concluded, we left them. But we little knew the false move we had made in what we had said about reaching Lata in three days. The big rascal had seen with a quickness worthy of a Neapolitan that days were important to us, and that it was necessary for us to get to our goal in a short time. This gave an oppor-

tunity of putting on the screw, which was used vigorously both then and afterwards. Soon there came a message from the porters that eight roubles a man would not be enough, that they must have ten; and Paul, who brought us the tidings, added that from what he had heard he was perfectly certain that the demand would not stop here, but that if we conceded the ten roubles, twelve would be demanded, and so on until some absurd sum was reached. We absolutely refused to promise the sum asked, therefore, whereupon the big man said that we were not the honourable and high-minded persons he had taken us for, and that he and his comrades would have nothing to do with us; so the bargain was broken off. The excellent chief took our side warmly. He solemnly harangued the recalcitrants before a circle of the men of Utchkulan, telling them that their conduct was unworthy of honest men, and was a disgrace to the village; that they were behaving ill to strangers, which was a most evil thing to do, and then he washed his hands of any ill that might follow, not figuratively, but actually, having water poured over them by a servant. It was about as much use as it might be for a Bishop to go down to the Stock Exchange and hold forth on the wickedness of overreaching one's neighbour. The porters were perfectly willing to bear the spiritual load of their own iniquity, but no load of a more material kind. However, it seemed that there was nothing more to be done that night, and we consoled ourselves as well as

we could be by watching a splendid sunset ; but a sunset is less of a consolation than might be expected to men who are sadly uncertain how they shall get on their way. That night a Russian colonel arrived in the village on some official business, and Moore and the chief went to tell him of our difficulty. When convinced that we were not vagabonds he promised aid, but the extent of his power seemed doubtful.

The next morning was exceedingly fine, and I spent some time in wandering about the ugly and dirty village. Grimy-looking shanties were the cottages of the inhabitants, and the children who played about the muddy lanes were, so to speak, enamelled with dirt. Certainly if a man's skin were to become as that of a little child in the Caucasus, it would not be nice. A ceremony which, I am glad to say, is commonly antecedent to children in this primitive land—to wit, a wedding—was performed on the day when we arrived, and high revel was either continued through the night or begun again very early next morning, for as I passed the house where the rejoicing had been, there came from it a wailing, monotonous chorus more dreary than can be told, but intended to signify pleasure and mirthfulness. Close to this place I met Walker, who was in much perplexity. ‘ How do they manage their merry-making in this country ? ’ he said. ‘ It must be hard for a man to be jovial on sour milk. Perhaps they succeed, and they seem to sit up all night over it ; but is good-fellowship measured

by the quantity taken, as was the case with us in the old drinking days? Have they their four-pail men, as we had our four-bottle men; and is biliousness looked on with the same jocose sympathy which our grandfathers gave to a red nose? These things are a mystery.'

The hovels where these festivities were going on appear in the woodcut opposite, which is from a photograph taken by Walker, when, according to Caucasian custom, the men were standing on the roofs of the houses to signify their joy and contentment. The valley at the head of which Elbruz is seen is that of the Khursukh, and what appear to be the two peaks of the mountain are in reality the cliffs on either side of the great gap in the south-western part of the extinct crater which has been mentioned. From Utchkulan only the western peak of Elbruz is seen. This entirely hides the eastern height.

Our excellent friend Tokmak Akbaief worked well for us that day. He spoke of being able to oblige men to go with us, but I doubt much whether the misty authority of the chief of a Caucasian village would extend so far. In any case he did not attempt this exercise of power, but sent round to some neighbouring hamlets and got together eight men who were willing to carry our burdens to Lata. Having collected the gang, he brought them to us in the afternoon, and they seemed strong fellows enough. One, a very powerful man, was introduced to us as the leader of the rest.



DISTANT VIEW OF FIRRIU7

1. The first part of the document is a list of names and addresses of the members of the committee.

He was, we were told, a judge of the district, and this high office, though it did not prevent him from carrying a load for us, gave him some authority over the others, which he promised Tokmak Akbaief to use judiciously on our behalf by keeping the younger men in order, and making them do their work properly. On close acquaintance this judge turned out a sorry rogue, but he was not an evil person to look at, having an honest expression and an open straightforward way of looking a man full in the face, which is not uncommon with very great scamps. At first, indeed, we thought that we were fortunate.

After everything had been settled and the men had gone, Tokmak Akbaief stayed with us some time, being fond of talk, as all the chiefs were when they unbent. He was not only chief of the district, we learnt, but acted also as a Government banker for the people round, and he told us that he had in his possession at that time 50,000 roubles (6,875*l.*) belonging to the peasants of Utchkulan and other villages, and showed us with some pride a large account-book, in which everything was systematically entered. It was not perhaps a great wonder to us, but we could appreciate the pleasure with which he said that he could tell immediately what was due to any man. He also showed us his watch, a very rare treasure in the Caucasus, and the more prized by him that it had been given him by the Grand Duke Michael, who had slept a night at his house when travelling through the country.

Tokmak himself made Moore a present of a beautifully ornamented rifle-rest, which being shod with a long steel spike could be used as an Alpine, or rather a Caucasian stock.

From Utchkulan the view of Elbruz which Walker's photograph has shown, is exceedingly beautiful, and of rare glory that evening was sunset on the great dead volcano. After the rose-tint came with wonderful vividness that strange after-glow in which a mountain stands out so brilliantly white and clear against the darkening sky, paling after a few instants so suddenly and with a change so great that it seems almost as if the life had passed from what the moment before was animate.

We were late in getting off next morning, as the porters were very tardy in making their appearance, but some of them loitered in at last, and we were told that the others were to be picked up on the road. Tokmak Akbaief, as a special mark of courtesy, walked a little distance with us, and I believe there was real regret on both sides when the time came for saying good-bye to our most kindly host. I have never seen more goodwill towards strangers, or a more honest desire that they should be fairly dealt with, than were shown by this upright and hospitable Mohammedan.

For some distance the character of the great valley remained the same as it was round about Utchkulan. There was a wide, level base, well cultivated. The grassy sides were lofty, but monotonous in form and

colour. There were at first scattered *châlets*, and from some of these the followers who had been wanting when we started came out, certainly with no undue haste, to join us, the judge, who was last of all, keeping us waiting some time. With the true Caucasian dislike to walking a yard more than they could help, most of the men brought horses with them to ride to the foot of the pass, and they were cheerful enough at first, as riding at a foot-pace gave an admirable opportunity for that conversation which is so dear to their race. After they had been with us a short time, we found that they had one characteristic which we had not yet observed among the Caucasians. This was extreme strictness in the performance of religious rites. In each village we had visited there had been a priest, and from a scaffolding erected for the purpose resounded every evening the famous call to prayer. But nobody prayed in consequence, or even suspended talk for a moment, and as to religious ceremonies, we never could find out whether any were celebrated. The priest generally seemed the idlest man in an idle village. Now, however, we were with men who were at least strict in outward observance. When at midday we halted in the grateful shade of a pine-wood, our followers before eating said their prayers at great length and with severe regard for form. The judge stood in front of the rest, three men kneeling behind him, and four more behind these. At intervals they touched the ground with their foreheads. While with us the men prayed in this manner three

times a day; in fact, we were among the pharisees of the Caucasus. We found them to be rogues, but it is wonderful what pleasure a thoroughly dishonest man seems to feel in saying his prayers.

The valley had grown narrower before we reached the wood, and grew yet narrower as we ascended. Presently we came to the place where the path to the Nakhar pass turns off up a lateral glen; at least it appeared to us that we clearly quitted the main valley, which lying nearly north and south for some distance below this point, trends above it to the south-east. From the head of the valley we now quitted a pass over the main chain as marked on the Russian map, but we were unable to get any information from the natives respecting this route, except that it existed.

The lateral glen which we entered was, in its lower part, of great beauty. The path lay through a forest of great trees, and below rushed down a powerful torrent, perhaps the first affluent of the Kuban. Above, the valley widened, and after walking over some upland meadows we came to a shepherd's hut, where, said the judge, we were to stop for the night. The afternoon was yet but little spent, so we absolutely declined to halt, and the men very reluctantly went on, exceedingly discontented, after the fashion of Caucasians, at our taking precautions against a very heavy day's work on the morrow. Shortly after leaving the hut we came in sight of the pass, a snow-col obviously

easy and not high, of which Gardiner remarked most justly that it could if necessary be crossed in one day from Utchkulan; of course the pass would be somewhat tiring if thus traversed, as the snow would not be reached until the afternoon, and would therefore be soft. Not long after we first saw the col we came to a bit of level grass, and here our men said absolutely they must stop. We were still some distance, two hours as later appeared, from the foot of the snow, and could easily have gone further that afternoon. Most of the men had been riding, and none of them had carried burdens, so that they were not in the least fatigued, but indolence asserted her irresistible claim, and as they were clearly determined to waste time, there was nothing for it but to give in with good grace and halt for the night.

Some shepherds with their flocks were near the head of the valley, and we sent a couple of our porters to them to buy a sheep. They were some time gone, and we whiled away as best we could two hours which ought to have been passed in getting to the foot of the snow-slopes. Evening came, and our men said their prayers with even more energy than they had shown at midday. Soon afterwards the two returned bringing with them a bonny young black sheep, which was soon killed and skinned, and then over the carcass there arose a very pretty quarrel, which is perhaps worth telling, as it was really due to that one incautious speech at Utchkulan which had

already caused us so much trouble. What happened now was almost the necessary sequence to what befell us there.

Our followers had learnt in the village what we had unfortunately made evident—namely, that we were pressed for time, and that it was of great importance to us to get over the pass quickly; so that they had us, as they imagined, in their power. They had said their prayers vigorously, and were not disinclined to sin up to the amount of the credit which they thought they had established aloft, and the sheep gave them an opportunity. When engaging them we had stipulated, as we always did with porters, that they should bring their own provisions, to which they entirely agreed. Now, however, they demanded half the sheep for which we had paid, and after some talk we gave them the two fore-quarters, being anxious to humour them, as it would be almost impossible for us to find our way on the other side of the mountains without their aid. But the two fore-quarters, which were very nice joints in their way, were brought back and contemptuously thrown down in front of us. Full of astonishment we sent for the judge, and asked him what was wrong.

The Judge.—We are very much discontented, and indeed with good reason. You are behaving most ill to us. You promised that you would feed us, and feed us well during the journey (this was a lie), and now you send us two fore-quarters of a sheep.

Moore.—But what ails with the two fore-quarters?

The Judge.—Everything ails. The haunches and saddle are the best parts, as any one knows, and you take these for yourselves, and give us what is not so good. The young men are very wroth, and rightly too. Understand that we despise the miserable fare you offer us, and that we will have nothing more to do with you, but will go back to our homes. Fore-quarters of a sheep, indeed!

Oh, the monotony of human nature! Here we had come this long journey, and had reached this secluded valley of the mysterious Caucasus, to have the exact equivalent of a mutiny in the servants' hall. The butler and the footmen would not eat shoulder of mutton. That was the translation of the quarrel which had arisen, and furiously it raged, just as it might in a well-regulated country-house. But presently our men went beyond the pretensions even of English servants. Said one of the porters, 'You are treating us vilely, and departing from your word. You promised Tokmak Akbaief that you would behave handsomely to us, and would buy not one, but two, three, or four sheep if we desired, so that we might feast and make merry. Now you offer us only the worst portion of one sheep, and moreover you sit apart from us, as if we were dogs, forsooth. Who are you that you should do so? We consider ourselves quite your equals, and had expected that you would treat

us as your friends and comrades, and sit and eat with us. But we will have nothing more to do with you, and will go back to our homes, for in truth you are low vagabonds, whom we altogether despise.' Here followed a string of very furious abuse and a chorus of approbation from the rest, the judge, who had been sent specially to keep the younger men in order, encouraging the mutiny in every possible way. In a short time he came to us with a demand that he and the others should be paid at once for their day's work, without which, he said, they would do nothing more. This meant of course that they were to be placed in a position to leave us whenever they might think fit, without any loss to themselves. Things looked serious, for the fellows had worked themselves into a state of real passion, and it was quite possible that with Caucasian thoughtlessness as to consequences they might go back to their hamlets. We might perhaps succeed in getting them punished if they did so, but we should miss the steamer at Soukhoun Kaleh which, for two of us, would be a very serious matter.

Moore took aside the judge, who was busy promoting the cursing and swearing, and told him that no payment would be made until the end, and that he must endeavour to quell the rebellion which had arisen; 'and remember,' added Moore, 'that Tokmak Akbaief has sent you as chief of the party, and that I have your name written down. If the men go back,

we shall complain to the Russians, and shall send them your name, and, whatever may be done to the rest, you may be sure that you will not go unpunished.' Now the judge was an arrant coward, and the news that we had his name, and the threat of sending it to the Russian authorities, fell upon him like cold water in the midst of his hearty enjoyment. Heaven only knows whether the Russians would have done anything, but he certainly was startled at the hideous idea that the pleasure of abusing travellers might have to be paid for, and that the whole cost might fall to him. It suddenly struck him that he was possibly getting into a very nice scrape, and self-interest produced a rapid conversion. He withdrew the demand for payment, and set to work to calm the others, who just before he had been inciting to mutiny. As has happened with much greater agitators, he found quelling the storm very different work from what raising it had been, but at last something like peace was restored, and the men gave us no more trouble that night. To a few incautious words at Utchkulan all our difficulties had been owing, and there was some satisfaction in shutting the door after the horse was out of the stable, by drawing a moral, which was:—When travelling in a wild country never be in a hurry, or, if you are unavoidably pressed for time, do not let the natives find it out.

One has heard sometimes of a dislike on the part of Mohammedans to eating with Christians. It was

worth notice that in this squabble the rigid observers who were with us, so far from showing any feeling of the kind, complained that we did not eat with them, as in good fellowship we ought to have done.

CHAPTER XII.

THE NAKHAR PASS AND THE VALLEYS OF THE
KLÛTCH AND THE KODOR.—THE LAST MARCH.

Caucasian dawdling—The Nakhar Pass—Poor view from the Col—The southern side—Great change—The valley of the Klûtch—Magnificent forests—Descent of the valley—Extraordinary grandeur of the scenery—A waterfall—A mineral spring—The valley of the Kodor—Sir John Maundevile and his account of the cloud that covered the heathen Emperor and his host—Solitude of the Kodor valley—Wonderful fertility—The tombs of the warriors of the Kuban—The Tchkalta—Indolence of our followers—The Engineers' Camp—The farewell of the men of Utchkulan—Their indifference to fasting—Beautiful view of the valley—Another camp—Lata—The malaria—Walk to Zebelda—Its position—An exploring party—The road from Zebelda to Soukhoun Kaleh—The Greek settlement on the Kelasur—Uncertainty as to the track—Intense heat—Thoughts on Caucasian travel—The valleys of Eastern Abkhasia—The End.

DURING the first part of the night an ominous cloud covered the col of the Nakhar pass, and as it was certain that the Utchkulan men would not make their way over the snow if the work was in any degree more difficult than usual, I watched the sky with considerable anxiety for some time. The Nakhar might be crossed in almost any weather by moderately resolute mountaineers, but neither bribes nor taunts would be likely to have any effect on our porters if there was

even the appearance of risk, and I felt sure that our friend the judge would become strongly sensible of his duty towards his wives and family should there be a remote possibility of the smallest injury befalling him, and there was therefore some little cause for uneasiness. This vanished, however, at midnight, for the mist lifted, some clouds which had risen at sunset disappeared, and it was clear that the most faint-hearted would not find in tempest or fog any excuse for turning next day. Our followers had spoken, however, before we quarrelled with them of the work being severe on the other side of the pass, owing to the badness of the path down the valleys of the Klütch and the Kodor, and had expressed much doubt whether we could reach Lata in two days from our camping-place. It would want hard walking to do it, more than men carrying burdens could accomplish, they said, and we none of us doubted that in the matter of being behindhand they would be at least as good as their word. They said, and said I believe truthfully, that they themselves wished to make the journey quickly, as they were anxious to get back to their homes as soon as possible, it being harvest-time; but nevertheless it was tolerably certain that this would be as nothing against the national love of dawdling, and that they would halt without scruple or shame whenever indolence so inclined them. However, there was the certainty of fine weather, and that was something.

The forerunner of dawn, that is to say, Paul—who

always got up some time before sunrise to make tea and to put things in order before a start—roused us for our day's work when the first faint light showed in the eastern sky. We were soon ready to go, but of course had to wait while the Caucasians stretched themselves, conversed for some time, and in leisurely fashion caught their horses. This done, we got them off after rather more than the usual delay, and made our way over the stunted pastures of the valley's narrow base. At some little distance from our sleeping-place we passed a shepherd's hut, half-ruined but inhabited, and here our indescribably lazy followers wished to make a long stoppage, which we absolutely refused to allow. Having found how very little use concession had been the night before, we took a different tone now, and curtly told them to obey orders without discussion. This surprised them in no small degree, but it was obviously the right way to treat them, for after a protest they submitted, and unless I mistook the purport of some low-toned, uneasy talk which they had together, were uncomfortable about their last night's frolic, and began to throw the blame on each other, like frightened schoolboys. Some two hours after leaving the sleeping-place we came to a tiny alp at the foot of the glacier which we were to cross. Here the horses had to be left, and to this place we ought to have come the night before, for the little alp, tolerably level in parts and well supplied with water, offered quite as good a camping-ground as

the spot at which we had halted ; but our followers had been earnest in their determination to waste time.

The top of the Nakhar is a stony *grat*, whence a little glacier descends in gentle undulations and at a small average angle. This glacier is partly divided in the middle by a ridge of rocks, and the traveller crossing the pass from the northern side strikes to the left of this ridge, and makes in an oblique line towards the left, *i.e.*, towards the east. The easy ascent lies over slopes and terraces of snow, and with this in good condition about an hour and a half are required to go from the little alp to the *grat*, which is struck at its eastern end under a small rocky peak. Oxen and unladen horses are driven over this pass.

Our fellows lounged across the glacier in the leisurely Caucasian fashion, and would have made I do not know how many halts on the easy way if we had not angrily urged them on. To their often-repeated statements that they were men and not animals, and must have frequent rest, we answered illogically enough that it was their business to obey and not to discuss, and as this was precisely the kind of argument they understood, we got them to the top of the pass in decent time. There of course they took a prolonged halt while we looked at the view, which indeed was but a poor one. There was little to be seen to the north, and to the south scarcely anything worth observing except a glimpse of the great valley of the Kodor. For a pass over the main chain the Nakhar certainly seemed singularly uninterest-

ing, but we were to come to better things before long, and to tread enchanted ground.

On the southern side of the chain where the Nakhar crosses it is a wild *cirque*, surrounded by small rocky peaks, to which cling a few steep glaciers. Of these only one, which is in the north-western part of the *cirque*, and descends to a level of perhaps 7,500 feet, is of any size. The col itself, although the way to it on the northern side had been across a glacier, was free from snow, as were the slopes beneath it on the south. Down these, which are partly grass, partly rocks and stones, a zigzag path, not ill-contrived, leads to the head of the valley of the Klütch.

This path we followed down a very steep descent of some 2,000 feet, at the end of which we found ourselves at the beginning of the valley, and already surrounded by the magnificent vegetation of the south. The Klütch being reached, our men made a long halt for conversation and prayer, so that there was plenty of time for us to look about us, and to realise the wonderful change from the Northern to the Southern Caucasus. It was as if we had travelled, not over a narrow ridge, but over a great space of country. We were in another climate—in another land. Most people know the astonishing difference between the two sides of the great Alpine chain, between the austerity and severe beauty of Switzerland and the colour and the splendour of the richness of Italy; but even this is not so great or so striking as the difference between the

northern and southern slopes of the Caucasus. We had left on the other side dull grass-land very monotonous in colour, sparse pine-woods, bare rocks, a keen and bracing air. Here we came to vegetation of almost tropical richness, to many flowers, to a huge forest of noble trees, covering hill-side and ridge, to a varied profusion of beautiful colour, to the hot, close, and as it were loaded southern atmosphere. The Abkhasian valleys of the Caucasus have a more than Italian richness, as those of the north have a more than Alpine severity. It seemed hard to believe that only a few hours' walking were required to pass from one region to the other.

That the beautiful land we had now reached was not free from some of those evils which affect countries where a powerful sun shines on a rich vegetation, we were destined at a later period to discover to our cost. That we were to suffer from one of the lesser plagues of a hot climate we found out at once. From the dense herbage round mosquitoes and horse-flies rose in crowds, and attacked the whole party with the voracity due to a long fast. Why insects in unfrequented places should have such a passion for human blood, which cannot possibly be part of their natural diet, is a great mystery to me. Nature, contrary to her usual practice, seems to have inspired them with an instinctive desire for food they can but very rarely get. A dog does not hunger after peaches, neither does a horse after mutton-chops; but in an uninhabited country mosquitoes prey on the traveller as readily as though

man was their habitual and natural food. This appetite is as difficult to understand as a cat's fondness for fish.

They attacked us with eagerness certainly, and with fair impartiality between Moslem and Christian, but, if they had a weakness, it was for the judge. That worthy man was saying his prayers with his usual vigour, but the horse-flies—with a view, no doubt, to increasing the merit of the effort—swarmed round him and plagued him so that he was obliged at last to stop for a short interval of cursing. These horse-flies of the Klütch valley were the most venomous I have ever known. The effect of their bites did not disappear for some time.

We had halted on the border of the mighty forest which covers all the valley, save a little space at its head, where the ground is for the most part clear of large trees, though covered with the dense vegetation of which I have spoken. But only a short distance is it from the foot of the *cirque* to the woodland, and starting again at the end of prayers, which the mosquitoes and the horse-flies played a demoniacal part in greatly shortening, we were almost immediately in the shadow of the woods, and through these woods our path lay for the rest of the day as we descended towards the great valley of the Kodor.

The beauty of the forest has in one way a greater effect than the beauty of mountains. It is immediately and intuitively felt by all. Snow scenery, in spite of

the conventional raptures which it produces, is not always deeply impressive to those who look on peak and glacier for the first time. It requires thought and observation fully to appreciate the high mountains, but no man with any sense of what is beautiful in nature can wander unmoved through the glades of a mighty forest. The mystery and grandeur of great woods seem to affect alike the rude and the cultivated mind. The Caucasians, like most primitive people, have usually no appreciation of fine scenery; yet it has been seen that one of them spoke with rapture of the woodlands which lie near the Ingur; and the readers of Stanley's account of Livingstone will remember how fondly the great traveller spoke of the greenwood, and how he hoped that his body might rest in the shadow of one of those great African forests through the deep recesses of which his path had so often lain.

Now our way this day was through a primeval forest as beautiful, I believe, as ever gladdened a wanderer's eyes by its magnificence or blessed him with its shade. Those who know only the pine-clothing of the Alps can form no idea of the varied grandeur of these woodlands of the southern slopes of the Caucasus. An intensely fertile soil is here acted on by a sun of almost tropical power, and the forests which thus created spring from the hill-sides are to the Alpine forests as a cathedral to a church, or a line-of-battle ship to a frigate. Even the memory of the

rich vales of the Italian Alps grows pale when they are compared with that marvellous wooded ravine through which the Klütch flows down to the Kodor.

The scale of the trees, I need hardly say, grew much greater as we descended. Those first seen were birches, but we soon came to far greater and loftier growths, and walked in the shadow of the giant pine and of the lofty Levant oak. Both these trees attain a huge size in the Klütch valley, the latter especially growing to an immense height and becoming the predominant tree as the downward course is followed. The underwood, which is very dense, consists of rhododendron, azalea, hazel and laurel, the latter being in great profusion, and sometimes making the way dark as though it were night. Among the great trees we came to beeches as we got lower down.

The steep sides of the valley are of great height, but the dense woods cover them completely, extending to the lofty ridges, so that the richest colour is combined with noble mountain form. The only way in which I can attempt to give any idea of the glories of the Klütch is to ask the reader to imagine the beautiful bank of Cliefden steeper than it is, and some fifteen times higher. Even then would be wanting the occasional glimpses of lofty peaks. Perhaps the finest part of the whole of this unequalled valley is that opposite a nameless glen which opens out of it to the north-west, ascending with wonderful steepness to a stately peak, which, rising over the fore-

shortened slopes, seems of almost incredible height. From its foot a powerful stream roars down to join the furious Klütch. The glen itself, broken and precipitous, but covered by the magnificent forest, has that strange look of wildness and solitude which belongs sometimes to recesses in the heart of the mountains where is intuitively felt that man goes rarely or never. Abkhasian hunters doubtless traversed it in former days ; but it is now, like much of the country round, as solitary as the great Sahara.

It had been only a little after ten when we had reached the head of the valley, and for the whole of the rest of a long summer's day we were journeying through the glades of great trees, following a track as faint as the clue to Rosamond's bower ; but the judge, who acted as chief guide, was not an incompetent man, albeit a disloyal and abusive one, and had that remarkable power of remembering a path he had formerly followed in which the natives of mountain countries seem sometimes to rival Red Indians. Through the densest vegetation, the thickest underwood, in the splendid groves of laurel where we had almost to go on all-fours, through brake of azalea, of rhododendron, over decaying masses of forest *débris*, he never hesitated or faltered, never once strayed from the true line. In spite of the shade the heat was intense, and the Caucasians, accustomed to the bracing air of the northern slopes, suffered quite as much from it as we did, while we were all alike victims to the un-

remitting vigour of a cloud of insects which held to us throughout the day, which must have been marked with a red letter for them. The judge was, I think, their special favourite, for when we passed out of the dark shadow into a streak of sunlight, I could see a host of mosquitoes like a glory round his head.

Our men, though stopping often after the Caucasian fashion, went well over the rugged way, which was a steep descent, the valley of the Klütch sinking with great rapidity. The track, for path it could not be called, lay over the roughest possible ground for walking, but nevertheless we made fair progress, and found ourselves as evening came on drawing near the end of the valley, in the lower part of which we halted for some time by a waterfall of great beauty. The Klütch makes many bounds in its progress down its steeply-falling bed, but we had more often heard than seen the angry stream; now, however, we were in full sight of a magnificent plunge of the river, and stood watching it for long as it showed gloriously in the mellow light of that beautiful southern evening. Although the streams of the Caucasus are so numerous and powerful we had, strange to say, seen but few waterfalls, and these were not striking; but that on which we now gazed seemed noble and magnificent, even in the valley of the Klütch.

Near was a mineral spring, and of this our followers who had, I know not how, learnt that mineral waters have medicinal qualities, drank largely. As the excel-

lent creatures were all hale and strong as men could be, they would have been puzzled to say what good result they expected ; perhaps, however, in this respect they were not unlike the drinkers of mineral waters further West. Even as old gossips in the Bath Pump-room did, they chatter over their drink, but this was only natural, for the sons of Utchkulan were of rare fertility in speech, rivalling our early friends the men of Gebi. All day long the chorus had gone on, led by the judge, who talked steadily from the top of the Nakhar pass to the waterfall and the mineral spring. He was a good leader, having a mighty chest and possessing one of those resonant baritone voices which rarely belong to any but very powerful and vigorous men.

The track which we followed all day is on the left bank of the Klütch, and it was just nightfall when we reached the bridge, which very near the end of the valley carries the path over to the right bank of the river. Having crossed, we camped for the night on a beautiful bit of level grass-land by the waterside. The judge had strongly urged us to halt at a lovely little meadow in the woods which we had passed some distance higher up, telling us that we could not reach that night any other place fit for camping ; but one might as well believe what a man says about his own horses, as pay any attention to a Caucasian in these matters, so we had absolutely refused to stop. The place where we did halt by the bridge was perfect for

a bivouac in every way. Its height above the sea was, according to the barometer, rather less than 3,500 feet, a lower elevation than we had slept at for some weeks. The col of the Nakhar pass is 9,500 feet above the sea, so that we had descended 6,000 feet. On the Russian map some châteaux are marked at a point on the right bank of the stream considerably above where we camped, but we had not been able to see any sign of them. The valley of the Klütch is indeed an absolute solitude. At one place our followers pointed out to us, high up on the eastern bank, a ruin, which they told us was that of a fortress commanding the pass in former times, but this stronghold has been long, long deserted, and no habitation now breaks anywhere the solitude of the forest. The Nakhar pass is still traversed, but the number of those who cross it has much fallen off of late years. When we were inquiring for porters at Utchkulan, we could not hear of a single man in the village who had been over the pass that season, and the judge, our principal guide, told us that formerly he used to cross the Nakhar once a year, but that now for a great while he had not been over it.

There is a certain melancholy felt after passing through a region of extraordinary beauty, at the thought that it may never be seen again, and this was certainly strong at the end of a day's journey through the Klütch, for a traveller could hardly hope that his way would ever again lie through the light and shadow

of its magnificent woods. In the course of much travel in mountain country, we had seen nothing so noble and beautiful as this vast ravine with its almost tropical forest clothing it from stream to ridge. The like may be found amongst the Himalayas or Andes, but not amongst the Alps.

The long grass of the little meadow was pleasant to lie on, but the horse-flies and mosquitoes made night hideous, and at the first hint of dawn we were glad to get ready for a start. Even the indolent Caucasians dawdled less than usual, so that we were on the march shortly after daybreak, plunging at once into the dense forest, where for some distance the path lay through a 'thick pleached alley,' almost as closely covered by the foliage as the old-fashioned French *berceau*. Now and then there was a glimpse of hill and valley, but save for these momentary breaks we were for two hours in the pleasant half-darkness of the thick woods, and when at last we came out dazed and blinking into the sunlight, we found ourselves in the great valley of the Kodor, which we had entered we knew not when in the shadow of the forest. The way was now for a while over the fair meadow-land, broken by trees and underwood, which here lies on the northern side of the rapid Kodor. We had by this time advanced some distance into Abkhasia, which we had entered when we descended into the valley of the Klütch. This land has been spoken of by a rightly famous traveller of other days, whose name I mention with some just national

pride. Sir John Maundevile has written of Abkhasia, or, as he calls it, Abcaz, and in doing so has given an example of that faculty in which he was unrivalled. The Caucasians are good liars; sometimes admirably inventive liars, far excelling as a rule us poor Westerns in this respect; but it is something to think that here England has held her own—rather more than her own—and that an Englishman has set foot in the Caucasus, or at all events has written of it, compared to whom the Caucasians are indeed as little children. Says Sir John: ‘In that kyngdom of Abcaz is a great marvaylle. For a provynce of the contree that hath well in circuyt 3 iorneyes that men klepen Hanyson, is alle covered with derknesse, withouten ony brightnesse or light; so that no man may see ne here, ne no man dar entren in to hem. And natheles thei of the contree seyn that som tyme men heren voys of folk, and hors nyzenge and cokkes crowynge.’

‘For a cursed Emperour of Persie that hight Saures, pursuede alle Cristene men to destroye hem, and to compelle hem to make sacrificise to his ydoles; and rood with grete host, in alle that ever he might for to confounde the Cristene men.’ A large number of whom endeavouring to escape from him he met, whereupon ‘the Cristene men kneleden to the grounde, and made hire preyeres to God to sokoure them. And anon a gret thikke cloud cam and covered the Emperour and alle his hoost,’ ‘and so schulle thei ever

more abyden in derknesse, tille the day of Dome be the myracle of God.' (Edit. 1725.)

So speaks the truthful knight, recorder of so many marvels, and, strange to say, five centuries after his death the idea of a great cloud covering the beautiful Abkhasian country seems not without a certain figurative truth to the traveller who passes through its lonely valleys. It would be hard to find anything fairer and richer than the meadows and forests by which the Kodor flows, and we saw them under the full strength of the southern sun to which the land owes much of its extraordinary fertility; but though hardly any natural beauty seemed wanting to the magnificent valley, it was impossible to traverse it without that feeling of gloom and desolation which comes from the absence of any sign of human occupation. Dwellers in the upper part of the vale there are none whatever. We did indeed meet three pale, hungry-looking wayfarers on their way to the northern side of the chain, but they in nowise belonged to the valley, and were hastening out of it as quickly as they could. Considerably lower down we found some engineers surveying, and there is a Russian post at Lata where once was a native village. But soldiers of an alien race holding a country cannot be looked on as inhabitants, and above the river Tchkhalta there are not even soldiers. The finest part of the Kodor is a gorgeous solitude, and its loneliness is the more impressive that it is a very garden of the earth. As we went our way over the rich broken

prairie which forms the wide base of the upper part of the valley, we passed scenes of beauty such as could not be rivalled on the Italian side of the Alps, and the fertility of this Caucasian Eden is equal to its splendour. We found, growing wild, peaches, apples, plums, strawberries, cherries, crab-apples, walnuts, and filberts. There were also wild raspberry and currant-bushes, wild vines and hops. Perhaps a more generous soil does not exist. It was almost appalling to find a land thus teeming with the fruits of the earth altogether deserted by men. It seemed as though there hung over this beautiful Kodor some curse as heavy as that of which Maundevile, after the fashion of his time, strove to give material description. Despite its noble and varied beauty there was an unutterable sadness about this valley of the shadow of death.

Even for our shallow and prating followers it had a mournful association. At one place, where the turf was marked by what looked like some rough heaps of logs, the men halted, and turning towards the East muttered a few words. When I learnt the meaning of this I almost forgave their dishonesty and lying. Here it seems in former days was a great fight between the Abkhasians and the warriors of the Kuban valley. The log-heaps marked the tombs of the northern heroes, and, in accordance with a beautiful usage, the Mussulmen of the Karatchai never pass this place without pausing to say a prayer by the graves of their countrymen dead in honourable war.

Otherwise our followers gave us little cause for liking them better that day. They loitered and dawdled with more than Caucasian indolence, thereby greatly increasing the severity of their labour, for, as any one who has carried a burden in a mountain country knows, irregular walking makes the work much harder. Moore had said to them in the Klütch valley, 'If you go well and get us to Lata in three days, we will pay you as for four days. This I swear to you by running water, the British Parliament, or any other type of purity.' But now, when reminded of this, the judge answered with prompt rhetoric:— 'Money is a good thing, a very good thing; but better still is that breath which is the life of man (putting his hands on his huge chest). If we walk so as to do ourselves grievous harm, of what avail will an extra day's pay be?' Wherein verbally the judge had much the best of it, though as a matter of fact he and the rest were dawdling abominably and eating wild fruit, whether ripe or not, with a hideous indifference to results.

We got them along, however, by hook or by crook, and reached towards noon what is perhaps the grandest part of the valley, that where the Tchkhaltá flows into the Kodor. The track rises to the top of a spur which forming the left bank of the tributary stream, juts for some distance into the great vale, and from the height thus gained there is a noble and marvellous prospect of the wild but beautiful glen through which

the Tchkhaltá rushes, of the mighty valley of the Kodór, and of a very lovely wooded dale which opens into it from the south nearly opposite the Tchkhaltá, altogether a sight not to be forgotten as seen under a mid-day sun. At the head of the Tchkhaltá valley is a fine peak, which is disclosed with singular abruptness to those who are descending the vale of the Kodór.

That great valley narrows somewhat below this stream; the forest creeps nearer down to the river, and much of our way was in the grateful shadow of the woods; but, sunlight or shadow, there was no getting our men over the ground at anything approaching a fair pace. They were civil and submissive now, having entirely abandoned their native insolence, but in spite of all we could say they flopped down at every tempting-looking place, just as people do after a picnic at Burnham Beeches or Bushey Park, but without the fair excuse which such can give of having eaten and drunk too much. Save in so far as the Caucasians had indulged in a taste for wild fruit, the diet of both travellers and followers that day and the evening before had been such as might have suited a Trappist monk in Holy Week. Empty or full, however, our men were impartially indolent, and we were discussing the expediency of two of the party pushing on to Lata to get horses if possible, leaving the others to guard the baggage, when suddenly in an open space among the trees we came to tents assuredly not made or occupied by Caucasians. It was the encampment

of a Russian officer engaged in surveying the country, who had pushed thus far forward in the beautiful wilderness. Very naturally he wondered not a little at the sudden appearance of four travellers from the depths of the forest of the Kodor.

When it was explained to him who the vagrants were, however, he was most kind and courteous, as were invariably the Russian officers whom we met during our journey. He gave us all the information we needed, and with the greatest good-nature allowed us to take for our course to Lata two horses and a Mingrelian their owner who with his animals was attached to the encampment. We were able therefore to get rid of the men of Utchkulan. I believe there was heartfelt pleasure at parting on both sides. Since we had been on the southern slopes of the chain, and as we approached the Russian post, our followers had become civil, nay, almost obsequious and deferential. Whether the officer at Lata would have punished them simply on our complaint I very much doubt, but certain it is that they were oppressed by a vague fear of having their misdeeds visited on them, and were only too glad to be allowed to turn back and get on their way home without any awkward questions being raised. As dismissing them was our act we paid them as for the whole journey, to their huge surprise and delight, for they fully expected to have their hire largely docked, not understanding how we, having now the best position, could fail to take advantage of

it. The judge was almost unmanned when, having carefully counted the rouble notes, he found the sum correct, and sent us a message that he had some words to say to us, and entreated us to hear him. We agreed of course; whereupon the judge addressed himself to the engineer officer's servant, who understood his language better than Paul. This man translated what was said into Mingrelian for Paul, and Paul rendered the discourse to us. Thus well reported the judge spoke:—'Tell the gentlemen,' he said, 'that we feel indeed what noble and honourable persons they are, and how greatly above us. It has been most truly a pleasure to serve them. For those wild, foolish, and miserable words which were spoken two nights ago, we most humbly implore the gentlemen to forgive us. I did indeed endeavour to restrain the young men, but they were full of folly and violence, and would not listen to me (he had been the worst of them all). Now in truth they feel how bad and vile their conduct was (murmurs of assent from the others), and we all pray the gentlemen to forgive us, and to look upon the words spoken as those of mere madmen and idiots, meaning nothing, for madmen and idiots indeed we were when we insulted men so honourable and so much above us. We were dogs and sons of dogs to behave as we did (applause), and indeed the gentlemen may well despise what was said, and look upon it as so much mud, dirt, and mire under their feet (general assent from the rest.)'

Such was the full and ample apology of these strange fellows. Did it come from mere fulsome servility at being paid more than they expected, or from honest regret taking an exaggerated form? Perhaps both feelings prompted the men of Utchkulan, in whom, whatever one might think of their character, there certainly was one thing to admire, and that was their stout indifference to fasting. They had the smallest possible stock of food for their two days' walk back to the Kuban, but for this they seemed to care nothing. The Caucasians assuredly are not the slaves of their appetites. Let any one try to imagine the consternation and fury of a party of Swiss guides who found that for a two days' march their only provisions were some miserable scraps of mouldy bread.

As for us, we got the Mingrelian and his pack-horses off as soon as we could, for there was still a long stretch of country between us and Lata, and went on our way through the forest over the worst planned path I have ever seen. It was tiring work, for the heat was, as it had been all day, intense, and the way lay over a series of steep and for the most part unnecessary ups and downs; but unlooked-for recompenses for labour and fasting are sometimes at hand in the Caucasus, and, as in the beginning of our journey we had lighted on that wonderful rhododendron garden on the slopes above the Rion, so now we came to a sight of such surpassing beauty as to be more than full reward

for hunger and the weariness of following that rugged Abkhasian track.

From a little open place in the woods where the path wound round a spur, there opened suddenly the vista of the great vale. Afar off at the head, stately sad-looking rock peaks, snow-crowned; below these and in apt contrast with their desolate grandeur, the promontories and slopes of the rich, smiling valley covered through all their great extent, and down even to the place where we stood, by the deep-toned but varied colour of the magnificent forest; beneath, a fair meadow-land, through which flashed the rapid Kodor—a scene almost perfect in its fulness of beauty, as looked on by the light of a southern sunset; but one would fain have beheld some sign of human life in this splendid, solitary vale.

A sign of life we did indeed see considerably lower down, but it was due to a mere pioneer in the fertile wilderness, like the Russian officer whom we had already met. Just after nightfall we came to the encampment of a second engineer, employed like the first in surveying the valley. As we were still some little distance from Lata, and as the track was not such as would be delectable in the dark, we camped here for the night. There was a little bit of level ground where we could have slept pleasantly enough, if only the engineer's horses had not been in the habit of browsing there. Now there is an old saying that a horse will not tread on a sleeping man, but from my

experience of that night I would strongly advise travellers to avoid, if possible, putting this saying to the test. Two hours' walk next morning took us to Lata, which consists of a large barrack, an adjoining building used as a hospital, and a number of trim white cottages. These have succeeded the native dwellings which once stood here, but have now altogether disappeared. The situation in a wide undulating meadow broken by trees and underwood, with the great forest on either side, is extremely beautiful, and one of the streams of the Kodor here running through several channels flows hard by the houses. A pleasanter place than this seems for man to live in could hardly be desired, but there hangs over it, as over all the fair country round, a terrible curse, the weight of which we were in some degree destined to feel. The powerful sun acting on the teeming vegetation raises the subtle miasma so often found in places of rare beauty, and the magnificent valley of the Kodor is full of malaria. Lata is so unhealthy that it has been found necessary to build a hospital for the soldiers of the garrison at Zebelda, which is some distance lower down the valley, but stands on higher ground. Here the men can recover from the effects of the illness, but at Lata convalescence is extremely slow, sometimes impossible. The fever, we were told, rarely kills on the first attack, but is not unfrequently fatal if taken a second time, so that the Kodor is to no small number in truth the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Passing

through the country as we did in full summer time, and sleeping two nights on the ground, we were not likely to escape, and we all four suffered afterwards from the fever, which took ten or twelve days to inculcate. Two of my companions, I regret to say, were very seriously ill from it on the first attack, and have had more than one relapse since, for after the fashion of malaria fevers it is, if taken badly, apt to recur, an obstinate and unwelcome visitor whom it is exceedingly difficult finally to dismiss. The engineer at whose camp we passed the night came down during the day suffering from the common illness.

Risks of this kind, however, must often be run in travel, and we thought not at all of the fever during the day we stopped at Lata, where Captain Samoelensky, the commandant, gave us a welcome which could hardly have been more kindly and genial if we had been old friends instead of utter strangers. A man must have journeyed in a wild country to know how pleasant it is to be thus greeted on returning to civilisation. The authorities at Tiflis had written to the Governor of Soukhoum Kaleh, and he had informed Captain Sameolensky of our probable arrival. He thus knew who we were, but had it been otherwise, our appearance would certainly have justified him in putting us under arrest as armed and singularly suspicious vagabonds.

There was no possibility of getting on further that day, and Lata was a place well-suited for that lounging indolence which is so grateful after hard walking. The

principal amusement of the soldiers seemed to be rearing bees; and there was an immense collection of hives all fully tenanted. That the men should not seek any severe form of industry appeared to us most natural, for the heat at Lata was intense, and the air oppressive and enervating. The night was almost as close as the day, and no one was sorry to make an early start. By the courtesy of a Russian colonel, who was at Lata for an inspection of the garrison, we were allowed to take two horses belonging to the troop to carry our baggage to Soukhom Kaleh. Our that day's goal was Zebelda.

The path, after running for a time parallel to the river, turns aside to the north to pass a ridge projecting far into the valley. Easy zigzags lead through the forest of which the limit is now well-nigh reached, and when the watershed is gained there is seen to the west a country of gentle hill and dale, pretty no doubt, but tame indeed after the gorgeous grandeur of the Klütch and the Kodor. Below, at no very great distance, is a trim village, inhabited by some of the Greek colonists whom the Imperial Government is establishing in the country. Two paths lead from the top of the ridge to Zebelda, one passing through the Greek village, the other to the left of it; according to the surly young Polish soldiers who had been sent in charge of the horses, the latter of these ways was the best, in which case the track to the habitations of the Greeks must be bad indeed. After following a rough and stony path

down the side of the ridge, and then across some undulating country, we crossed the two branches of the Amtjkal, both of which happily were bridged, and then a short walk over some gently rising meadowland took us to Zebelda, which was reached early in the afternoon.

The track led us to the so-called fort, a low rickety-looking building, surrounded by a wall. Close to this was a cantine, and some distance off, on higher ground, the hospital. We had gone nearly north from the valley of the Kodor in the morning to cross the ridge, but after this is passed the path turns to the west, descending into the Amtjkal valley, which opens into that of the Kodor. Zebelda is situated in comparatively open ground high above the junction of the two streams, and commands a fine view of both valleys, that of the Amtjkal being from this point the most striking. The Kodor river turns sharply to the southwest at the point where the Amtjkal joins it, and flows to the Black Sea through country pretty perhaps, but tame and commonplace compared with that through which its early course is run.

The courteous Russian colonel who had kindly allowed us to take a couple of horses from Lata, was at Zebelda that night, having to inspect the hospital, where all possible care seemed to be taken of the invalids, a number of whom, poor wan ghosts of men, were hovering about, their pitiful weakness telling only too clearly of the poison which is breathed in the air of beau-

tiful Lata. In the evening arrived a party of engineer officers, who had been engaged in examining the Maruk pass from the northern side of the chain to Zebelda and Soukhoum Kaleh. Their next task was to be the Nakhar, of which, so far as its fitness for traffic went, we were able to give them no very encouraging account. The Imperial Government is justly anxious to have a good road made between Soukhoum and the country north of the range, so perhaps before this there has been invasion of the solitudes of the beautiful Kodor.

We started early next morning, as the distance from Zebelda to Soukhoum Kaleh is considerable, and journeyed through a smiling country of hill and dale, much wooded, fertile seemingly, and pretty enough, but moulded on a small scale, and petty compared with the glorious mountain-land we had so lately looked on. The way was for some time down the glen watered by the Machara, and the road recently repaired and laid out anew in places told of an engineering different from that of the Caucasians. The inhabitants whom we met were no longer full of astonishment and curiosity at the sight of wanderers clad in the hideous clothes which mark the civilised man. We were in an untravelled country no longer.

Toiling on under a heat that would have done honour to the tropics, we came about midday—having quitted the regular track—to a Greek settlement on the left bank of the rapid Kelasur. The houses, many

of them lately built, looked, after the rough huts of the north, as neat as model cottages, but, unless I am greatly mistaken, there was much squalor and wretchedness within these spruce abodes. The place was full of malaria. Several of the men whom we saw about were obviously just recovering from the fever, and going into one of the cottages I found three poor fellows down in the grip of the enemy. The prevalence of this kind of illness and the enervating climate seem to have deprived the colonists of all energy, for they have not had industry enough to throw a bridge over the Kelasur, which they must cross to go to Soukhoun, and the river therefore has to be passed by fording, which must always be a task of some difficulty, and is probably impossible after heavy rains.

After we had waded through the swift waters, there befell us a mishap which has happened often enough to travellers when nigh to their journey's end. We more or less lost the way. We were near Soukhoun Kaleh, and there the march would close—there was our goal; and not a little was that goal now desired, for the country was no longer interesting, and the fatigue of walking that afternoon was almost indescribable. The heat, made the more oppressive by the closeness of the laden atmosphere, exceeded any that I have known out of the tropics, and much that I have known in them. It nearly dazed us, coming as we did from the cool bracing air of the northern

slopes of the mountains; and even the two Poles, wiry young fellows as could be seen, and accustomed to the climate, were greatly exhausted. Soukhoun Kaleh, and the fall of the curtain on the last scene of the last act, were longed for much.

But the place which a short time before had been thought near at hand seemed to have become remote. We could not tell how far we were from it, or when we should reach it, as uncertain of the right direction we wandered somewhat aimlessly on. Although we were close to the sea, it was still hidden from us. One of the Poles, who had some idea of the way, said that we should not see the waters until we were near to Soukhoun, and the sight of them was therefore greatly desired; but from the top of each slight rise in the ground nothing more was to be seen than the rich undulating country, and, for anything that appeared, the Euxine might have been a hundred miles off.

I was in some degree distracted from the weary discomfort of that torrid afternoon by meditating over a question which had suggested itself to me, and may also occur to those who have thus far followed these pages. To what extent, I asked myself, can the Caucasus be considered as fit for travellers, putting out of question sybarites on the one side, and explorers ready for any hardship or danger on the other. The question did not prove very easy to answer.

Most men loudly profess their indifference to 'roughing it' in the abstract, but this may frequently

be construed to mean that they will always be ready for any kind of discomfort except the particular kind they are called on to undergo. Now in the Caucasus a traveller must be prepared to 'rough it,' if he wants to see the real mountain country. On the northern side, it is true, there will be nothing very severe for him to undergo. He will have to sleep out sometimes, fair weather or foul; to put up, when housed, with the poorest lodging and with a good deal of dirt; to carry a large quantity of live stock about with him; to do without alcoholic drink of any kind whatever; and to submit now and then to very short rations, for though daily supplies of good mutton and indigestible bread can always be obtained in the villages, it is, as has been said, often exceedingly difficult to get a stock for a two or three days' expedition. Such troubles as these, however, very moderate fortitude will enable the traveller to bear, but from what I heard, and from what I saw, it certainly seemed to me that, on the southern side, there might be hardship, sometimes even danger. There is the chance of fever, a visitation from which in the mountains would probably be trying. Food is occasionally difficult to get, for the cogent reason that the natives have very little themselves; or for the yet more cogent reason, that there are not any natives. All that has to be purchased is the subject of infinite haggling and extortion, the men of the south being very adepts in cozenage. The dirt is worse than that of the north. Theft is not uncommon, and in what is

said to be the most beautiful district of the whole Southern Caucasus there is some danger to life. The inhabitants of Suenetia have a great taste for homicide. Dread of punishment by the Russians will usually prevent them from suppressing a stranger, but they are an impulsive people, and may, if excited, be carried away by their feelings and cut a traveller's head off, yielding to a strong natural yearning, and deaf for the moment to the promptings of self-interest.

It appeared to me then that the Caucasus could not at present be considered as set in order, swept, and garnished for travellers. No doubt things will alter, may alter too rapidly on the northern side, if the railway brings civilisation there to change the patriarchal life of the Mohammedans ; but probably for some time to come a journey through the valleys which lie under the great peaks will present more novelty than will be altogether liked when compared with a trip in Switzerland or the Tyrol, and will possibly be found trying by luxurious or irritable men.

But for practised travellers, for sportsmen in the true sense of that much-abused word, it certainly would seem that one part of the Caucasus yet untrodden is of the highest interest and attraction. We had seen something of this region, and would fain have seen more. On the southern side of the chain, and bounded on the east by the Ingur river, is a great tract of magnificent country, scored by deep valleys, watered by powerful streams, and covered by a mighty

forest. To the confines of this region belong on the north-west the Kodor, and on the east those woodland hunting-grounds of which Mohammed at Urusbieh had spoken with such enthusiasm. So far as I could learn, there are no inhabitants whatever, and the solitude of the district is only disturbed when a few hunters from the north venture into it after the game in which it is said to abound. There would be difficulty no doubt in exploring it, and danger from malaria, but some hardship might well be undergone and some risk run to see these magnificent untrodden glens, and to follow the mountain game which would be found in their recesses.

Surely, I thought, in these days when men go so far to seek untravelled country and for virgin hunting-grounds, it should be remembered that the valleys of Eastern Abkhasia are as yet but little known, and that the beasts of forest and mountain are there to try the hunter's craft. But here my meditations were interrupted by a cry from one of the Poles, and looking up I saw the waters of the Euxine, a great sheet of light under the declining sun, and close at hand the pleasant bay and trim white houses of Soukhoum Kaleh.



THE WESTERN CAUCASUS

from the Russian Official Map

English Miles

Russian Versts

Authors Route
Western Tcheret





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TRAVELS in CENTRAL CAUCASUS and BASHAN: including Visits to Ararat and Tabreez, and Ascents of Kazbek and Elbruz. By DOUGLAS W. FRESHFIELD, Author of 'Italian Alps,' and Editor of 'The Alpine Journal.'

Although the ethnology and history of the Caucasus have been treated of by various authors, information concerning its natural features had been up to the appearance of this volume scanty and difficult of access; and until the Summer of 1868 no Englishman had visited the most interesting of the chain, and its two most famous summits, Kazbek and Elbruz, were still unascended. The chief aim of the journey described in the present volume was to explore the interior of the chain and to effect the ascents of Kazbek and Elbruz. The Writer and his friends hoped, by penetrating on foot the recesses of the mountains, to learn the form of the peaks, the extent of the snow-fields and glaciers, and the character of the forest and flora, so as to be able to draw a general comparison between the Caucasus and the Alps.

Before, however, carrying out this part of their design the travellers made a rapid journey through Syria, in the course of which they visited the Hauran and Lejah districts, recently brought into notice by the supposed identification of the ruined towns still existing in them with the cities of the gigantic Rephaim laid waste by the Israelites. The Author records his conviction that this theory is unfounded, and that the ruins of the so-called 'Giant Cities' are in fact composed of Roman edifices mixed with many buildings of more recent date.

On landing in the Caucasus (which they reached by Russian steamer from Constantinople) the travellers proceeded to Tiflis, whence they made an expedition along the Persian high-road to Tabreez. On their return they partially ascended Ararat, paid a visit to the Armenian Patriarch at Etchmiadzin, and traversed a little-known portion of the Georgian and Arminian highlands.

Starting from Tiflis at the end of June, the travellers spent the next two months in mountain exploration. During this time they made the first successful ascents of Kazbek and Elbruz, traversed eleven passes, varying from 8,000 to 12,000 feet in height, and examined the sources of eight rivers and both flanks of the main chain for a distance of 120 miles. The greater portion of the volume is occupied by the narrative of their adventures in the mountains, and the difficulties arising both from the roughness of the country and of its inhabitants. The Author describes the Ossetes, a tribe known as 'the gentlemen of the Caucasus,' and contrasts the slothful and churlish Mingrelian races on the south side of the chain with the industrious and hospitable Tartars on the north.

Having crossed the main range by the Mamison Pass to the Rion sources, the party made an expedition to the Uruch Valley and back across the previously untrodden snow-fields of the central chain. The travellers' route then led them through the pathless swamps and forests of the Zenes-Squali into Suanetia, a mountain basin renowned for the barbarism of its inhabitants, the extraordinary richness of its

