



BY HAWLEY SMART.

Author of "Breezie Langton," "At Fault," "Tie and Trick," "Long Odds," "Without Love or Licence," &c., &c.

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Perhaps the climate pulled them through, perhaps the healthiness of the life they led defied injury to the constitution, but at all events if they drank as hard as that famous army of Flanders swore, they thrived upon it, and were uncommonly healthy.

That he never got a line from Miss Lynden puzzled Tom Byng as the winter wore away; but that he did not hear again from Hugh Fleming puzzled him still more, especially as he had once or twice taken an advantage of a flag of truce going across the Russian lines to forward a note to him.

CHAPTER XIX.—MADEMOISELLE IVANHOFF.

A little before Christmas an event had occurred which Dr. Lynden had foreseen as likely, and which he had predicted might count for a good deal in increasing the prospects of peace, should it happen. Kars had capitulated, its gallant defenders having at last been starved into submission. Mouravieff had clung to his prey with the tenacity of a bull-dog, and his perseverance had been at length rewarded. The utter failure of Oman Pascha to come to the relief of Sir Fenwick Williams gave cause to much angry feeling both at home and in the Crimea. There was a prevalent idea in the English army that the defenders of Kars had been politically sacrificed, and that had the hands of the Turkish General not been tied, the defense would not have been in vain, and that he could have compelled the Russians to raise the siege before the garrison were reduced to extremities. Be that as it may, the Russians could now, at all events, point to the capture of Kars as a set-off to the loss of Sebastopol. There are people to this day of that way of thinking, and who still believe that salve to Russia's honour had much to say in bringing the war to a conclusion.

With the spring came councils and congresses, much diplomacy, and many protocols, the first result of which was the conclusion of an armistice. With the spring, too, came much drilling and smartening up of regiments that perpetual trench duty had made slovenly of appearance, and the whole army speedily resumed the appearance it might have worn had it been brought together in England, only with a workmanlike look about it that old campaigners could thoroughly appreciate. Advantage was taken of the armistice by officers on both sides to visit each other's lines, and here the English, thanks to the insatiable restlessness of their nation, speedily out-vied both their Allies and the Russians. The privilege was used sparingly by both the latter, but the British officer was emphatically "all over the place." He made his appearance at Batchi Serai, made pilgrimages to visit the scene of the battle of the Alma, he penetrated to the caves of Inkerman, and the limits of

his travel seemed only bounded by the capabilities of a Crimean pony. As Brydon remarked laughing, "no wonder our fellows are restless. We all feel as if we'd been strictly confined to our own parish for months. It's quite a luxury to break out and see how our neighbours get along."

"Just so," rejoined Byng, "and I tell you what it is, I vote we start for Batchi Serai to-morrow morning. We can go there and back in a day if we start early and take it easy."

"Done with you," said Brydon; "it's a longish day for the ponies, but the wiry little brutes 'll do it easy enough. That dash of Barb blood they most of them have in their veins pulls 'em through."

So it was finally settled that what Byng called a reconnaissance should be made next day, and that those two should ride to Batchi Serai with a view to prospecting for an expedition on a considerably larger scale a week or two later.

"We'll make up a party, you know," said Tom, "half a dozen of us, get a week's leave, take up tents and servants and pack animals and make a big picnic of it."

"Capital," replied Brydon, "we're all cunning in camp life now, and we ought to have a splendid time of it. There's one thing, you can depend on the weather out here. When fine weather's due it's fine, though it can be nasty enough in the winter, too."

"I wonder whether we shall pick up any news of Hugh Fleming in Batchi Serai. Most of these Russian fellows speak French."

"Which we don't," rejoined Brydon laughing, "so that won't much facilitate intercourse between us. But it don't matter. Fleming's doubtless been sent away far into the interior, or we should have heard from him before this. He's as likely as not at St. Petersburg."

A little after six the next morning the pair crossed the Traktir Bridge and having cantered across the valley made their way up Mackenzie Heights. It was a lovely spring morning, and the ponies seemed to revel in the fresh air and sunshine to the full as much as their masters, and when they halted on the banks of the Belbek and produced from their haversacks materials for an early luncheon, Brydon declared he had never been so hungry in his life, while Tom said he felt more like a schoolboy home for the holidays than ever. After a brief halt, they resumed their journey, and a little before noon entered the old capital of the Tartar kings. The first thing to find, undoubtedly, was an inn at which they could stay and rest their ponies. The unflinching little brutes had carried them well, but they had seven-and-twenty miles to carry them back and required a good long bait before being called on to fulfil their task; as for their riders they had the town to see, such as it was.

They were not long before they stumbled on one of those men who swarm all around the shores of the Mediterranean and Asiatic Turkey, men whose nationality it is impossible to define and who seem to speak, more or less, all the tongues of Europe. They are generally vaguely described as coming from the Levant, and from bankers to couriers, from restaurant waiters to promiscuous loafing and vagabondage, seem never at a loss about picking up a living. Some of them drive carriages, but many of them, like the man who so speedily became alive to the requirements of the two British officers, seem, though never at a loss for a job, incapable of taking up with steady employment. Their self-constituted guide quickly found them a suitable inn, and then in obedience to their behests conducted them through the principal parts of the town. There seemed to have been a touch of the Moor about the old Mongolian race before they had succumbed to the hordes of the Muscovite, as evidenced by the verandahs of the houses and the large tree-shaded gardens in which they were built. You would have said it was a pretty town lying at the bottom of a valley, well sheltered from the bitter blasts of the Steppes, but nothing more. The old palace of the Khans, though in excellent repair, struck Byng and Brydon as hardly imposing enough a home for such powerful rulers as the Tartar princes had been in the heyday of their power. In the beautiful gardens around it, a Russian band was playing a set of German waltzes, while strolling about, or sitting on chairs, were numbers of officers in every variety of uniform, from the Horse Artillery of the Imperial Guard down to the sturdy linesman. French uniforms, a few of these with a tolerably good mixture of the English scarlet. A few ladies, richly dressed, were scattered about amongst the chairs and evidently in great request with the militiares fortunate enough to be acquainted with them.

"Well," said Brydon, "these fellows are all brushed up like ourselves. They show small signs of having been through such times as they must have had the last few weeks in Sebastopol."

"Ho!" rejoined Byng, "here comes a poor fellow though, who still bears signs of having been in the thick of it," and as he spoke a Russian officer, whose face bore traces of severe illness, limped past with the assistance of a stick, and raised his cap with grave courtesy to the two Englishmen. They speedily found themselves cordially received by their late enemies, who not only expressed delight at seeing them but great regret at hearing that they were not to spend a few days there. One thing however, a grey-headed colonel with a decidedly Kalmuck cast of countenance, insisted on, was that they should join him in a *ponche* after the music was finished.