

# Checked: A Linnæus of the Hindu Kush.

A Thrilling Story of the Afghanistan Border.

The relentless August sun beat down on the old native fortress, which had lately been converted into the British frontier of Port Chardagh; down on the dusty little barrack-square, where a smooth-faced English boy, aided by a native jemadar, was drilling a levy of huge black-haired Pathans; down on the stuffy little room in the officers' quarters, where, cursing his lot even more vehemently than the telegraph clerk, sat Captain John Armstrong, D. S. O., the political officer of the district. It was only quite recently that Port Chardagh had risen to the dignity of possessing a political officer and a telegraph clerk. This district it controlled was, for that part of the world, a singularly peaceful one, and it commanded none of the great passes leading into India. The Hindu Kush as to be the nearest British outpost to the Russian sphere of influence in Central Asia; but it was less on this account than because of its proximity to the powerful khanate of Dilt that the government had suddenly thought fit to station a political officer there. England was on the verge of undertaking one of her "little" frontier wars, which might easily develop into a big one, if the Diltis elected to throw in their lot with the recalcitrant tribes it was thought necessary to punish; and although no European had ever been permitted to enter Diltistan, it was considered advisable to keep a watchful eye on it from our nearest point of vantage. Armstrong, then, whom none of the younger officers of the day possessed a better knowledge of either the frontier tribes or their dialects, had been selected for the post; and thus it was that on that breathless August afternoon he was sitting cursing the fate which had consigned him to such a God-forsaken spot, for he felt that the three months he had already passed there might just as profitably have been passed in the Highlands of Scotland as in those of Pathanistan. Never, no, never, had he been in such a beastly hole! True, Pargit, where he had last been stationed on similar work, was much enough; but there, at all events, the natives played polo, whereas here they seemed to care for nothing except tilling their wretched fields, and had not furnished him with matter for even one little report to the foreign office at Simla. As he lay listlessly smoking, and listening to the sounds vaguely floating in through the open window from the parade ground below, Captain Armstrong felt in a thoroughly bad temper.

But relief was even now at hand. A discreet cough and tap on the door presently announced Mohan Lal, the telegraph clerk, bearing a freshly-arrived dispatch, which, as he opened it, Armstrong saw was in official cipher code, and therefore of importance; and so, dismissing the salaamang Babu, he hastily got out his code book and proceeded to decipher it. It was from the political officer at Peshawur, and when translated read thus:

"From Simla. Reported Russian political agent, leave Reshat (the nearest Russian post to our frontier) on 21st. Secret mission Dilt. Watch frontier. If found on Russian territory, turn back. Use every possible effort prevent success. Important. Acknowledge. Braidwood. Peshawur."

So! here was work at last, and pretty ticklish work too, as Armstrong knew. Many a man in his place would have telegraphed back for more explicit instructions; but he was not one of that sort, and merely sending a curt acknowledgment of the receipt of the message.

The popular idea expressed in the phrase, "the art of self-defense," shows the opinion that the chief enemies a man has to defend himself from are visible and external. But the real danger of every man is from minute and often invisible foes. In the air we breathe and the water we drink are countless minute organisms leagued against the health of the body.

The one defense against these enemies is to keep the blood pure. Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery thoroughly purifies the blood, removing poisonous substances and accretions. When the blood is pure there is no harborage for the germs of disease which find a lodging only when the blood is impure and corrupt.

"I consider your 'Golden Medical Discovery' one of the best medicines on the face of the earth," writes Mr. Wm. H. Fletcher, of Red Oak, Montgomery Co., Iowa. "While in the south-west, three years ago, I got poisoned with poison ivy. The poison set in my blood and the horrors I suffered cannot be told in words. I thought I would go crazy. I tried different kinds of medicine, tried different doctors, but all the relief they could give me was to make my pocket-book lighter. I then began taking Dr. Pierce's Golden Medical Discovery. Took four bottles without relief. Kept taking it. Took five bottles and got entirely cured. Dr. Pierce's Pleasant Pellets cure constipation."

he set to work to think matters out. This was the 17th, and on the 21st the Russian agent was expected to leave Reshat; and here Armstrong spread out his map of the district and endeavored to calculate distances on it—no very easy task, as neither in Russian nor in Dilt territory were British topographers exactly welcome guests. It was evident that any person going from Reshat to Dilt must at a certain point pass very close to the imaginary British frontier line; but then the Diltis might have arranged a meeting somewhere outside their own country, and even if he found the Russian trespassing on territory claimed to be under British influence, he could not warn him off, as to detain him forcibly would be rather too arbitrary a proceeding. If he could only have got some reliable information from Reshat! But it was fully a week's journey distant, and there was no direct road thither, merely a sheep-track, occasionally used by Uzbeks bringing down salt in the summer time. For a time he actually thought of making a dash for Dilt himself, on the off-chance of forestalling and outbidding the Russian agent; but he had to dismiss this idea, as he knew the government would never sanction such a course, which, moreover, would probably only result in the murder of himself and his escort. For fully twenty minutes Armstrong walked up and down the bare little room, revolving plans in his mind and puffing out huge volumes of smoke, until an idea struck him, and summoning a servant, he bade him find the Havildar Daoud Shah, and tell him that Captain Sahib would speak with him at once. Presently a shadow fell across the map over which he was still poring; but he did not look up until he had leisurely finished his inspection of it. Armstrong had not lived among natives all these years without learning that one should never seem in a hurry. Then he raised his eyes, and saw the man he had sent for standing motionless at attention in the doorway.

Now Armstrong had been agreeably surprised on his arrival at Port Chardagh to find in the havildar of the newly-raised native levy an old acquaintance in the shape of Daoud Shah, who some years previously had acted for three seasons in succession as his shikari when trux-stalking in Balistan, when a strong feeling of mutual regard had sprung up between the two men. A Pathan of the Pathans, recking nothing of human life, and an outcast from his own district on account of a blood feud, Daoud Shah, had like many of his compatriots, drifted into the British service, prepared to be true to his salt; but probably equally ready to fight against it when his term of service was over if inclination prompted him to do so. None the less he had a great respect for the English sarkar and its officers, and above all for Armstrong Sahib, who at the risk of his own life had once rescued him from what seemed certain death on a treacherous snow-slope. Daoud Shah had sprained his ankle, and Armstrong had bound up the injured limb with strips torn from his own puttees, and stayed by his shikari all night on a ledge of rock fifteen thousand feet above sea-level, until morning dawned, and he was able to get down to the valley below, and return with help for the disabled man.

"Come in, havildar, and shut the door," said Armstrong; and then, as the Pathan obeyed, he continued, unconcernedly, "Have you ever been in Reshat?"

The havildar replied that he had, and that, moreover, he had known the living there at the present time. This was news indeed, and Armstrong's eyes could hardly prevent a flash; but he went on quite coolly: "And in how short a time could a strong man, knowing the mountains, go from here to Reshat and return?"

The havildar paused ere replying, and, striving to open a window, gazed eagerly forth at the great range of the Hindu Kush, which blocked the northern extremity of the valley. Then, as though satisfied with his inspection, he replied: "By the favor of God, in such a season as this, while the snow lies high on the summits, and in good weather, a man, if he is not afraid of the mountains, could go to Reshat and return in five days; but such as those—and he jerked his head disdainfully at the Chardagh levy in the barrack-square below—"would be fifteen days on the journey."

The days, and today was the 17th. There might yet be time, but Armstrong betrayed no emotion as he went quietly on: "And from Reshat to Dilt, how long for a party, probably of mounted men?"

It was now the havildar's turn to feel surprised; but he, too, betrayed none, as he slowly answered: "That, Captain Sahib, I cannot truthfully say; for I do not know the path, nor can I say whether it be practicable for mounted men; but not less than four days."

Armstrong asked no further questions, but paced once or twice thoughtfully up and down the room. Should he take the Pathan into his confidence or not? John Armstrong had not been born on the northern slopes of the Cheivista for nothing, and few men had the bump of cautiousness more fully developed than he; but experience had taught him that there are exceptions to every rule, even to that of never trusting a Pathan. Moreover, he had a real liking for Daoud Shah, the liking which one strong man has for another, who has cheerfully risked life and limb, by ledge and ice-slope and snowfield, with him for weeks at a time, and then, too, he instinctively felt that the Pathan had the same feeling for him. His mind was quickly made up, and suddenly halting and looking Daoud Shah straight in the eyes, he said: "Havildar, I am minded to intrust you with a more than common service. It has come to my ears that an agent of the Russian sarkar goes from Reshat to Dilt within the week to stir up the Diltis

against us. Now, this I must prevent at all hazards; and if such a man as you, whom I have trusted with this secret, were to go to Reshat and return within five days, bringing me accurate knowledge of his route, I might be able to do so."

The Pathan's eyes flashed for a moment, and then drawing himself together, he answered proudly: "Captain Sahib, you did me a great service once, and that have I not forgotten, and much honor do you do me now in speaking to me thus, and this also I will remember. This much only can I say, that if by the favor of God I am able to get to Reshat other than by the usual path, within five days, you shall know your heart's desire, and that without the knowledge of any other man." Then with a sudden change of manner he asked deferentially: "If the Captain Sahib would get him to travel through leave from the Lieutenant Sahib whilst he went to change his uniform?" and within half an hour he had left the fort so disguised that it would have puzzled even one of his comrades to have recognized in the dirty, unkempt tribesman the smart, well-set-up havildar of the Chardagh Rifles.

The fifth morning after his departure came without any news of him, and Armstrong, despite his belief in the man, was beginning to feel a little anxious; but towards evening Daoud Shah returned, a little thin and fine-drawn about the face, as a man might well be who for the best part of a week had been almost incessantly traveling over the worst parts of the Hindu Kush, but otherwise showing no signs of fatigue.

"Well, havildar, what news?" asked Armstrong, in his usual unconcerned manner, though his heart was throbbing violently, as the man sprang to attention at his approach.

"My news is this, sahib," he answered. "I have been to Reshat, and by the favor of God have found out this. For the past year there has been a Russian officer going and coming between Reshat and the north. But three days since he came again, and though he could not keep it secret, yet it was known in the bazaar that he rides to Dilt with four of an escort. Turcomans, he they, not Russians, as dark as an Afridi, but not so strong. Five days must he be on the road, on which horses travel slower than men, and on the fifth day, it is believed, but this I cannot say for certain, he meets certain of the tribesmen at the bridge over the Pashkend River, who lead him to a durbar at Dilt. Moreover, the man who guides him is of my blood, and he will lead him so that tomorrow evening he will pass along the hollow path which is three miles from the ruined tower where the sahib slept last month when he went to look for boxes."

Armstrong nodded to show he remembered the place, and then asked if Daoud Shah had seen the Russian officer.

"I did," sahib, was his reply; "he is of your height and shape, but older, and of weak vision, wearing blue chashmaks" [spectacles].

"Good; you have done well, very well, havildar," said Armstrong, approvingly, "and this service neither the sarkar nor I will easily forget. Say nothing to any man of where you have been; and go and get food and rest; but first tell the Lieutenant Sahib I would speak with him."

Ten minutes later the Lieutenant Sahib—a sandy-haired, smooth-faced English lad—was listening, wholly delighted and half incredulous, to certain instructions from the political officer. Indeed, he could not repress a chuckle of ecstatic admiration when Armstrong dismissed him with the final injunction, "Then you quite understand that if I have not returned by Thursday morning, or if you have not received a message in writing from me by the same date, you are to send this cipher telegram to Colonel Braidwood at Peshawur"; and before sunrise of the next morning Armstrong, accompanied by Daoud Shah and a little band of twelve picked men, all specially selected by the havildar, and clad alike in muffi-Afghan mufti, he it understood—had left the fort, and were already many miles away among the northern mountains.

Late in the afternoon of the same day a little company of five men on horseback was slowly making its way, under the guidance of a sullen-faced Pathan, through one of the most desolate and uninhabited districts of the Hindu Kush. The mounted men, consisting of four swartly-visaged Asiatics, and a European officer wearing blue spectacles, all dressed alike in dark-green uniforms, with cartridge-bands slung across their breasts, and baggy trousers stuffed into high boots, rode leisurely along. The men, weary by their long day's march, a great part of which had perforce been done on foot, leading their horses, lolled in their saddles, thinking hopefully of the time, now close at hand—so their guide assured them—when they would reach their halting-place for the night. Even their officer seemed to have relaxed his usual vigilance, riding bent forward in the saddle, and absorbed in his own reflections.

For ten long years Major Alexis Stephanooff, despite occasional more or less exciting interludes like the present, had been exiled from all that, in his opinion, made life worth living, and at last the chance of regaining this seemed fairly within his grasp. A smart young officer in the Preobrazhensky Guards, he had fallen into disgrace at St. Petersburg, inasmuch as, not content with high pay, general fast living and consequent neglect of his military duties, he had actually dared to indulge in the heinous offense of dabbling—very mildly, he it said—in politics, and that he had friends in high places, would probably have been transferred to Siberia, instead of, as was the case, to Central Asia.

Here, however, he had done his best to purge himself of his youthful betises,

and gradually acquired the reputation of a zealous and useful officer. He soon developed a marked aptitude for dealing with Asiatics, having naturally a pretty talent for diplomacy of the Russian order, which simply consists in secretly doing what you have openly promised not to do, and possessing in addition a marvelous gift of acquiring tongues. By dint of these accomplishments he had successfully engineered one or two rather delicate operations, so that in course of time he had risen to be secret intelligence officer on the Himalayan border—a post he had filled so well that it had been almost officially notified to him that if he proved successful in his present mission of adding to the British complications on their frontier, he would be recalled to Europe and reinstated in his old regiment.

Stephanooff had not the slightest doubts as to his success; he knew well enough that the bribe he was empowered to offer—one thousand breech-loading rifles, with ammunition for the same, and one thousand rupees a month as long as they continued offensive operations against the English—the Diltis would have claimed war against Mohammed himself; and although they had forbidden his entrance into their country with a larger escort than four men, he felt no misgivings on the score of his personal safety. He was accustomed to dealing with lawless Asiatics, and was, besides, a brave man, rather enjoying a spice of danger in his work. 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