

ACROSS ASIA ON A BICYCLE

THE JOURNEY OF TWO AMERICAN STUDENTS
FROM CONSTANTINOPLE TO PEKING

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TO
THOSE AT HOME
WHOSE THOUGHTS AND
WISHES WERE EVER
WITH US IN OUR
WANDERINGS



This volume is made up of a series of sketches describing the most interesting part of a bicycle journey around the world,—our ride across Asia. We were actuated by no desire to make a “record” in bicycle travel, although we covered 15,044 miles on the wheel, the longest continuous land journey ever made around the world.

The day after we were graduated at Washington University, St. Louis, Mo., we left for New York. Thence we sailed for Liverpool on June 23, 1890. Just three years afterward, lacking twenty days, we rolled into New York on our wheels, having “put a girdle round the earth.”

Our bicycling experience began at Liverpool. After following many of the beaten lines of travel in the British Isles we arrived in London, where we formed our plans for traveling across Europe, Asia, and America. The most dangerous regions to be traversed in such a journey, we were told, were western China, the Desert of Gobi, and central China. Never since the days of Marco Polo had a European traveler succeeded in crossing the Chinese empire from the west to Peking.

Crossing the Channel, we rode through Normandy to Paris, across the lowlands of western France to Bordeaux, eastward over the Lesser Alps to Marseilles, and along the Riviera into Italy. After visiting every important city on the peninsula, we left Italy at Brindisi on the last day of 1890 for Corfu, in Greece. Thence we traveled to Patras, proceeding along the Corinthian Gulf to Athens, where we passed the winter. We went to Constantinople by vessel in the spring, crossed the Bosphorus in April, and began the long journey described in the following pages. When we had finally completed our travels in the Flowery Kingdom, we sailed from Shanghai for Japan. Thence we voyaged to San Francisco, where we arrived on Christmas night, 1892. Three weeks later we resumed our bicycles and wheeled by way of Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas to New York.

During all of this journey we never employed the services of guides or interpreters. We were compelled, therefore, to learn a little of the language of every country through which we passed. Our independence in this regard increased, perhaps, the hardships of the journey, but certainly contributed much toward the object we sought—a close acquaintance with strange peoples.

During our travels we took more than two thousand five hundred photographs, selections from which are reproduced in the illustrations of this volume.

I

BEYOND THE BOSPORUS

On a morning early in April the little steamer conveying us across from Stamboul touched the wharf at Haider Pasha. Amid the rabble of Greeks, Armenians, Turks, and Italians we trundled our bicycles across the gang-plank, which for us was the threshold of Asia, the beginning of an inland journey of seven thousand miles from the Bosphorus to the Pacific. Through the morning fog which enveloped the shipping in the Golden Horn, the “stars and stripes” at a single masthead were waving farewell to two American students fresh from college who had nerved themselves for nearly two years of separation from the comforts of western civilization.

Our guide to the road to Ismid was the little twelve-year-old son of an Armenian doctor, whose guests we had been during our sojourn in Stamboul. He trotted for some distance by our side, and then, pressing our hands in both of his, he said with childlike sincerity: “I hope God will take care of you”; for he was possessed with the thought popular among Armenians, of pillages and massacres by marauding brigands.

The idea of a trip around the world had been conceived by us as a practical finish to a theoretical education; and the bicycle feature was adopted merely as a means to that end. On reaching London we had formed the plan of penetrating the heart of the Asiatic continent, instead of skirting its more civilized coast-line. For a passport and other credentials necessary in journeying through Russia and Central Asia we had been advised to make application to the Czar’s representative on our arrival at Teheran, as we would enter the Russian dominions from Persia; and to that end the Russian minister in London had provided us with a letter of introduction. In London the secretary of the Chinese legation, a Scotchman, had assisted us in mapping out a possible route across the Celestial empire, although he endeavored, from the very start, to dissuade us from our purpose. Application had then been made to the Chinese minister himself for the necessary passport. The reply we received, though courteous, smacked strongly of reproof. “Western China,” he said, “is overrun with lawless bands, and the people themselves are very much averse to foreigners. Your extraordinary mode of locomotion would subject you to annoyance, if not to positive danger, at the hands of a people who are naturally

curious and superstitious. However,” he added, after some reflection, “if your minister makes a request for a passport we will see what can be done. The most I can do will be to ask for you the protection and assistance of the officials only; for the people themselves I cannot answer. If you go into that country you do so at your own risk.” Minister Lincoln was sitting in his private office when we called the next morning at the American legation. He listened to the recital of our plans, got down the huge atlas from his bookcase, and went over with us the route we proposed to follow. He did not regard the undertaking as feasible, and apprehended that, if he should give his official assistance, he would, in a measure, be responsible for the result if it should prove unhappy. When assured of the consent of our parents, and of our determination to make the attempt at all hazards, he picked up his pen and began a letter to the Chinese minister, remarking as he finished reading it to us, “I would much rather not have written it.” The documents received from the Chinese minister in response to Mr. Lincoln’s letter proved to be indispensable when, a year and a half later, we left the last outpost of western civilization and plunged into the Gobi desert. When we had paid a final visit to the Persian minister in London, who had asked to see our bicycles and their baggage equipments, he signified his intention of writing in our behalf to friends in Teheran; and to that capital, after cycling through Europe, we were now actually en route.

Since the opening of the Trans-Bosporus Railway, the wagon-road to Ismid, and even the Angora military highway beyond, have fallen rapidly into disrepair. In April they were almost impassable for the wheel, so that for the greater part of the way we were obliged to take to the track. Like the railway skirting the Italian Riviera, and the Patras-Athens line along the Saronic Gulf, this Trans-Bosporus road for a great distance scarps and tunnels the cliffs along the Gulf of Ismid, and sometimes runs so close to the water’s edge that the puffing of the kara vapor or “land steamer,” as the Turks call it, is drowned by the roaring breakers. The country between Scutari and Ismid surpasses in agricultural advantages any part of Asiatic Turkey through which we passed. Its fertile soil, and the luxuriant vegetation it supports, are, as we afterward learned, in striking contrast with the sterile plateaus and mountains of the interior, many parts of which are as desolate as the deserts of Arabia. In area, Asia Minor equals France, but the water-supply of its rivers is only one third.

One of the principal agents in the work of transforming Asia Minor is the railroad, to which the natives have taken with unusual readiness. The locomotive is already competing with the hundred and sixty thousand camels employed in the peninsula caravan-trade. At Geiveh, the last station on the Trans-Bosporus Railway, where we left the track to follow the Angora highway, the “ships of the desert” are beginning to transfer

their cargoes to the “land steamer,” instead of continuing on as in former days to the Bosphorus.



THE DONKEY BOYS INSPECT THE “DEVIL’S CARRIAGE.”

The Trans-Bosphorus line, in the year of our visit, was being built and operated by a German company, under the direct patronage of the Sultan. We ventured to ask some natives if they thought the Sultan had sufficient funds to consummate so gigantic a scheme, and they replied, with the deepest reverence: “God has given the Padishah much property and power, and certainly he must give him enough money to utilize it.”

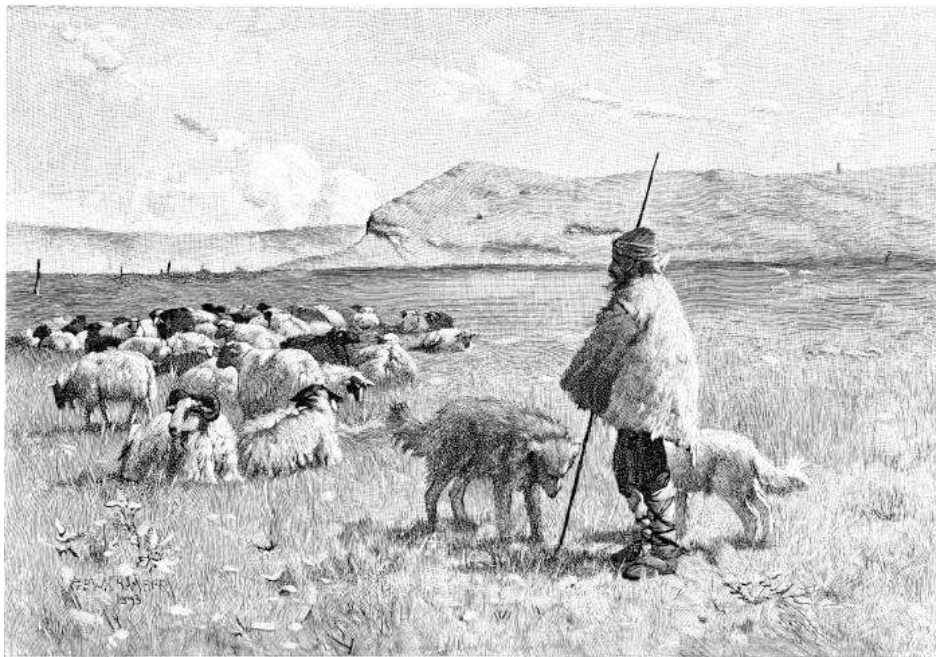
A week’s cycling from the Bosphorus brought us beyond the Allah Dagh mountains, among the barren, variegated hills that skirt the Angora plateau. We had already passed through Ismid, the ancient Nicomedia and capital of Diocletian; and had left behind us the heavily timbered valley of the Sakaria, upon whose banks the “Freebooter of the Bithynian hills” settled with his four hundred tents and laid the foundation of the Ottoman empire. Since leaving Geiveh we had been attended by a mounted guard, or zaptieh, who was sometimes forced upon us by the authorities in their anxiety to carry out the wishes expressed in the letters of the Grand Vizir. On emerging from the door of an

inn we frequently found this unexpected guard waiting with a Winchester rifle swung over his shoulder, and a fleet steed standing by his side. Immediately on our appearance he would swing into the saddle and charge through the assembled rabble. Away we would go at a rapid pace down the streets of the town or village, to the utter amazement of the natives and the great satisfaction of our vainglorious zaptieh. As long as his horse was fresh, or until we were out of sight of the village, he would urge us on with cries of “Gellcha-buk” (“Come on, ride fast”). When a bad piece of road or a steep ascent forced us to dismount he would bring his horse to a walk, roll a cigarette, and draw invidious comparisons between our steeds. His tone, however, changed when we reached a decline or long stretch of reasonably good road. Then he would cut across country to head us off, or shout after us at the top of his voice, “Yavash-yavash” (“Slowly, slowly”). On the whole we found them good-natured and companionable fellows, notwithstanding their interest in baksheesh which we were compelled at last, in self-defense, to fix at one piaster an hour. We frequently shared with them our frugal, and even scanty meals; and in turn they assisted us in our purchases and arrangements for lodgings, for their word, we found, was with the common people an almost unwritten law. Then, too, they were of great assistance in crossing streams where the depth would have necessitated the stripping of garments; although their fiery little steeds sometimes objected to having an extra rider astride their haunches, and a bicycle across their shoulders. They seized every opportunity to impress us with the necessity of being accompanied by a government representative. In some lonely portion of the road, or in the suggestive stillness of an evening twilight, our Turkish Don Quixote would sometimes cast mysterious glances around him, take his Winchester from his shoulder, and throwing it across the pommel of his saddle, charge ahead to meet the imaginary enemy. But we were more harmful than harmed, for, despite our most vigilant care, the bicycles were sometimes the occasion of a stampede or runaway among the caravans and teams along the highway, and we frequently assisted in replacing the loads thus upset. On such occasions our pretentious cavalier would remain on his horse, smoking his cigarette and smiling disdainfully.



HELPING A TURK WHOSE HORSES RAN AWAY AT SIGHT OF OUR BICYCLES.

It was in the company of one of these military champions that we emerged on the morning of April 12 upon the plateau of Angora. On the spring pasture were feeding several flocks of the famous Angora goats, and the karamanli or fat-tailed sheep, tended by the Yurak shepherds and their half-wild and monstrous collies, whose half-savage nature fits them to cope with the jackals which infest the country. The shepherds did not check their sudden onslaught upon us until we were pressed to very close quarters, and had drawn our revolvers in self-defense. These Yuraks are the nomadic portion of the Turkish peasantry. They live in caves or rudely constructed huts, shifting their habitation at will, or upon the exhaustion of the pasturage. Their costume is most primitive both in style and material; the trousers and caps being made of sheepskin and the tunic of plaited wheat-straw. In contradistinction to the Yuraks the settled inhabitants of the country are called Turks. That term, however, which means rustic or clown, is never used by the Turks themselves except in derision or disdain; they always speak of themselves as "Osmanli."

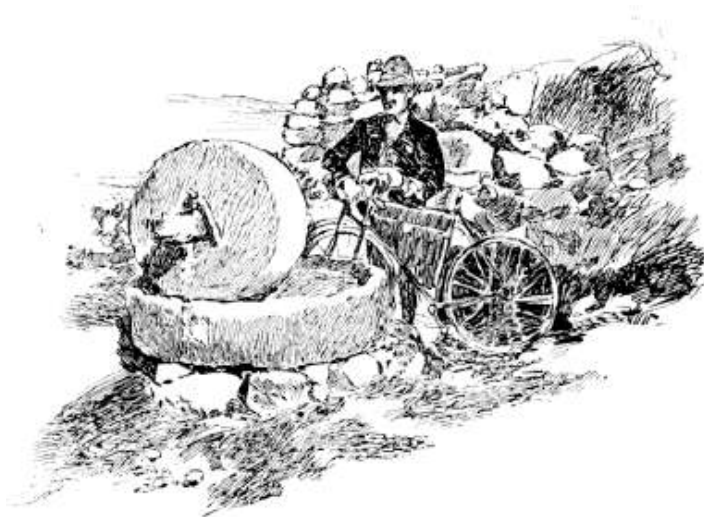


AN ANGORA SHEPHERD.

The great length of the Angora fleece, which sometimes reaches eight inches, is due solely to the peculiar climate of the locality. The same goats taken elsewhere have not thriven. Even the Angora dogs and cats are remarkable for the extraordinary length of their fleecy covering. On nearing Angora itself, we raced at high speed over the undulating plateau. Our zaptieh on his jaded horse faded away in the dim distance, and we saw him no more. This was our last guard for many weeks to come, as we decided to dispense with an escort that really retarded us. But on reaching Erzerum, the Vali refused us permission to enter the district of Alashgerd without a guard, so we were forced to take one.

We were now on historic ground. To our right, on the Owas, a tributary of the Sakaria, was the little village of Istanas, where stood the ancient seat of Midas, the Phrygian king, and where Alexander the Great cut with his sword the Gordian knot to prove his right to the rulership of the world. On the plain, over which we were now skimming, the great Tatar, Timur, fought the memorable battle with Bajazet I, which resulted in the capture of the Ottoman conqueror. Since the time that the title of Asia applied to the small coast-province of Lydia, this country has been the theater for the grandest events in human history.

The old mud-houses of modern Angora, as we rolled into the city, contrasted strongly with the cyclopean walls of its ancient fortress. After two days in Angora we diverged from the direct route to Sivas through Yüzgat, so as to visit the city of Kaisarieh. Through the efforts of the progressive Vali at Angora, a macadamized road was in the course of construction to this point, a part of which—to the town of Kirshehr—was already completed. Although surrounded by unusual fertility and luxuriance for an interior town, the low mud-houses and treeless streets give Kirshehr that same thirsty and painfully uniform appearance which characterizes every village or city in Asiatic Turkey. The mud buildings of Babylon, and not the marble edifices of Nineveh, have served as models for the Turkish architect. We have seen the Turks, when making the mud-straw bricks used in house-building, scratch dirt for the purpose from between the marble slabs and boulders that lay in profusion over the ground. A few of the government buildings and some of the larger private residences are improved by a coat of whitewash, and now and then the warm spring showers bring out on the mud roofs a relieving verdure, that frequently serves as pasture for the family goat. Everything is low and contracted, especially the doorways. When a foreigner bumps his head, and demands the reason for such stupid architecture, he is met with that decisive answer, “Adet”—custom, the most powerful of all influences in Turkey and the East.

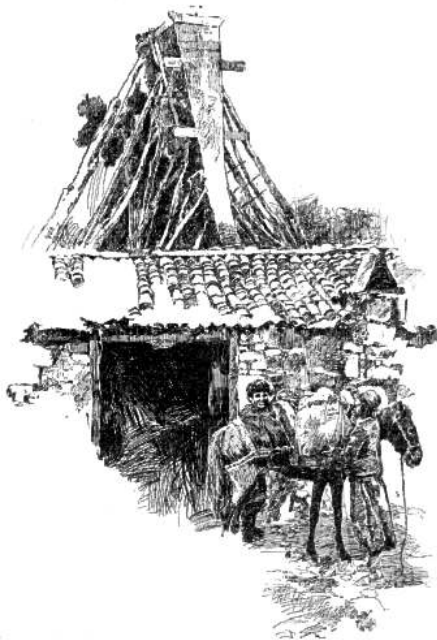


A TURKISH FLOUR-MILL.

Our entry into Kirshehr was typical of our reception everywhere. When we were seen approaching, several horsemen came out to get a first look at our strange horses. They challenged us to a race, and set a spanking pace down into the streets of the town. Before we reached the khan, or inn, we were obliged to dismount. “Bin! bin!” (“Ride! ride!”) went up in a shout. “Nimkin deyl” (“It is impossible”), we explained, in such a jam; and the crowd opened up three or four feet ahead of us. “Bin bocale” (“Ride, so that we can see”), they shouted again; and some of them rushed up to hold our steeds for us to mount. With the greatest difficulty we impressed upon our persistent assistants that they could not help us. By the time we reached the khan the crowd had become almost a mob, pushing and tumbling over one another, and yelling to every one in sight that “the devil’s carts have come.” The inn-keeper came out, and we had to assure him that the mob was actuated only by curiosity. As soon as the bicycles were over the threshold, the doors were bolted and braced. The crowds swarmed to the windows. While the khanji prepared coffee we sat down to watch the amusing by-play and repartee going on around us. Those who by virtue of their friendship with the khanji were admitted to the room with us began a tirade against the boyish curiosity of their less fortunate brethren on the outside. Their own curiosity assumed tangible shape. Our clothing, and even our hair and faces, were critically examined. When we attempted to jot down the day’s events in our note-books they crowded closer than ever. Our fountain-pen was an additional puzzle to them. It was passed around, and explained and commented on at length.

Our camera was a “mysterious” black box. Some said it was a telescope, about which they had only a vague idea; others, that it was a box containing our money. But our map of Asiatic Turkey was to them the most curious thing of all. They spread it on the floor, and hovered over it, while we pointed to the towns and cities. How could we tell where the places were until we had been there? How did we even know their names? It was wonderful—wonderful! We traced for them our own journey, where we had been and where we were going, and then endeavored to show them how, by starting from our homes and continuing always in an easterly direction, we could at last reach our starting-point from the west. The more intelligent of them grasped the idea. “Around the world,” they repeated again and again, with a mystified expression.

Relief came at last, in the person of a messenger from Osman Beg, the inspector-general of agriculture of the Angora vilayet, bearing an invitation to supper. He stated that he had already heard of our undertaking through the Constantinople press, and desired to make our acquaintance. His note, which was written in French, showed him to be a man of European education; and on shaking hands with him a half-hour later, we found him to be a man of European origin—an Albanian Greek, and a cousin of the Vali at Angora. He said a report had gone out that two devils were passing through the country. The dinner was one of those incongruous Turkish mixtures of sweet and sour, which was by no means relieved by the harrowing Turkish music which our host ground out from an antiquated hand-organ.



MILL IN ASIA MINOR.

Although it was late when we returned to the khan, we found everybody still up. The room in which we were to sleep (there was only one room) was filled with a crowd of loiterers, and tobacco smoke. Some were playing games similar to our chess and backgammon, while others were looking on, and smoking the gurgling narghile, or water-pipe. The bicycles had been put away under lock and key, and the crowd gradually dispersed. We lay down in our clothes, and tried to lose consciousness; but the Turkish supper, the tobacco smoke, and the noise of the quarreling gamesters, put sleep out of the question. At midnight the sudden boom of a cannon reminded us that we were in the midst of the Turkish Ramadan. The sound of tramping feet, the beating of a bass drum, and the whining tones of a Turkish bagpipe, came over the midnight air. Nearer it came, and louder grew the sound, till it reached the inn door, where it remained for some time. The fast of Ramadan commemorates the revelation of the Koran to the prophet Mohammed. It lasts through the four phases of the moon. From daylight, or, as the Koran reads, “from the time you can distinguish a white thread from a black one,” no good Mussulman will eat, drink, or smoke. At midnight the mosques are illuminated, and bands of music go about the streets all night, making a tremendous uproar. One cannon is fired at dusk, to announce the time to break the fast by eating supper, another at midnight to arouse the people for the preparation of breakfast, and still another at daylight as a signal for resuming the fast. This, of course, is very hard on the poor man who has to work during the day. As a precaution against oversleeping, a watchman goes about just before daybreak, and makes a rousing clatter at the gate of every Mussulman’s house to warn him that if he wants anything to eat he must get it instantly. Our roommates evidently intended to make an “all night” of it, for they forthwith commenced the preparation of their morning meal. How it was despatched we do not know, for we

fell asleep, and were only awakened by the muezzin on a neighboring minaret, calling to morning prayer.



GYPSIES OF ASIA MINOR.

Our morning ablutions were usually made à la Turk: by having water poured upon the hands from a spouted vessel. Cleanliness is, with the Turk, perhaps, more than ourselves, the next thing to godliness. But his ideas are based upon a very different theory. Although he uses no soap for washing either his person or his clothes, yet he considers himself much cleaner than the giaour, for the reason that he uses running water exclusively, never allowing the same particles to touch him the second time. A Turk believes that all water is purified after running six feet. As a test of his faith we have often seen him lading up drinking-water from a stream where the women were washing clothes just a few yards above.

As all cooking and eating had stopped at the sound of the morning cannon, we found great difficulty in gathering together even a cold breakfast of ekmek, yaourt, and raisins. Ekmek is a cooked bran-flour paste, which has the thinness, consistency, and almost the taste of blotting-paper. This is the Turkish peasant's staff of life. He carries it with him everywhere; so did we. As it was made in huge circular sheets, we would often punch a hole in the middle, and slip it up over our arms. This we found the handiest and most serviceable mode of transportation, being handy to eat without removing our hands from

the handle-bars, and also answering the purpose of sails in case of a favoring wind. Yaourt, another almost universal food, is milk curdled with rennet. This, as well as all foods that are not liquid, they scoop up with a roll of ekmek, a part of the scoop being taken with every mouthful. Raisins here, as well as in many other parts of the country, are very cheap. We paid two piasters (about nine cents) for an oche (two and a half pounds), but we soon made the discovery that a Turkish oche contained a great many “stones”—which of course was purely accidental. Eggs, also, we found exceedingly cheap. On one occasion, twenty-five were set before us, in response to our call for eggs to the value of one piaster—four and a half cents. In Asiatic Turkey we had some extraordinary dishes served to us, including daintily prepared leeches. But the worst mixture, perhaps, was the “Bairam soup,” which contains over a dozen ingredients, including peas, prunes, walnuts, cherries, dates, white and black beans, apricots, cracked wheat, raisins, etc.—all mixed in cold water. Bairam is the period of feasting after the Ramadan fast.

On preparing to leave Kirshehr after our frugal breakfast we found that Turkish curiosity had extended even to the contents of our baggage, which fitted in the frames of the machines. There was nothing missing, however, and we did not lose so much as a button during our sojourn among them. Thieving is not one of their faults, but they take much latitude in helping themselves. Many a time an inn-keeper would “help us out” by disposing of one third of a chicken that we had paid him a high price to prepare.

When we were ready to start the chief of police cleared a riding space through the streets, which for an hour had been filled with people. As we passed among them they shouted “Oorooglar olsun” (“May good fortune attend you”). “Inshallah” (“If it please God”), we replied, and waved our helmets in acknowledgment.

GRINDING WHEAT.

