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THE BLACK SEA SHORE.

*By Colonel C. E. DE LA POER BERESFORD, late Military Attaché
at St. Petersburg.*

THE Black Sea province, stretching from Novorossisk to Cape Pitsounda, is the Circassia of our infancy, whose beautiful daughters were exported like any article of commerce, to become the wives of the Pashas of Constantinople. It was called by the Russians *Zemlya Tcherkèsov*, the land of the Tcherkesses, *Tcherkess* being the Russian equivalent of Circassian; but the word is a misnomer, for not only the Black Sea province but the adjacent countries of Abkhasia, on the coast; Suanetia, close under the crest of Shkàra; Mingrelia, due south and contiguous to Suanetia; and Imeretia, through which run the Rion and Krivily rivers, all produced Tcherkesses. These four countries, occupying together an area less than that of Switzerland, difficult of access, in spite of their proximity to the ports of Poti and Batûm, have remained the least tranquil of the Trans-Caucasian provinces. Their populations seized the opportunity of the unpopular war to recommence their revolt against authority. These mountaineers combine this rebellion—much in the same way as the Letts and Esthonians nearly 1,000 miles to the north, on the shores of a very different sea—with an agrarian rising against the owners of the soil. The difference is, that on the Black Sea shores the proprietors are of one and the same race as the tenants, whilst in the Baltic provinces the latter are of Finnish extraction, and the landlords Russo-German barons.

Kutaïs, the capital of Mingrelia, has been the centre of disaffection in the Western Caucasus, quite independent of the troubles that have shocked the world in Georgia, Erivân, and Dâghestân. The Governor and Vice-Governor of the province have lately been removed by order of the Viceroy of the Caucasus. When the history of this insurrection is known, it will probably be found that these officials, at heart loyal to Russian rule, threw in their lot secretly with the insurgents for fear of their lives. In fact, the existing state of affairs in Mingrelia and Suanetia much resembles that in Greece some decades ago, immortalised by M. Edmond About in "*Le Roi des Montagnes*," for Governor, police, soldiers, brigands, and peasants are all bound together by secret sympathies, whilst outwardly deferential to Russia and drawing their various pay and allowances. Kutaïs was kept in order by a regiment of Cossacks from the Kubân district north of the great mountain chain, the 1st Khoper, or Grand Duchess Anastasia Michaclovna's Own. The 20th Infantry Division, the Staff of which is permanently in the town, sent three of its four regiments

to Akhaltzikh, Akhalkalaki, and Alexandropol, on the Turkish frontier. The danger lay, not in an invasion of the Sultan's troops, but in an uprising of the local reserve regiments. But the Russians until quite lately were, whilst apparently apprehensive of attack from the Trebizond direction, by the fleets of England or the armies of Turkey, quite confident as to the loyalty of the conquered races of the Caucasus. It was useless to point out the real danger to intimate friends. They considered warnings as mere blinds to dissimulate the action of perfidious Albion. Indeed, they would go further, and suggest that those who lived in Indian glass houses need throw no stones at the Caucasus. For a rising of the natives in India is an "act of faith" to the present day with the Russian Asiatic Staff in St. Petersburg. Its members merely smile politely if one attempts to disabuse them of this notion.

That there were, or even are, some grounds for this rooted belief it is impossible to deny. The Maharajah Dhuleep Singh, after having offered the splendid hospitality of Thetford to many of us, was treated most shabbily by the British Government. We who had robbed the Sovereign of the Sikh nation of millions refused to add a few thousands to his allowance. He retired to Moscow, whence he indited a letter to the *Times*, in which he signed himself "The implacable foe of England"; but his hostility was ended by his death. Doubtless a few Imperial gold eagles made their way into India, and a few things are known at Simla about the occurrences of these times at Moscow and in the Punjab. The danger of a second Sikh war was probably never very imminent. I remember a clever caricature of Prince Victor Dhuleep Singh, when a cadet at Sandhurst. He is represented as dining at the Staff College mess, and when asked what regiment he wished to be gazetted to, replies: "I think I shall go into the Blues, as they don't go to India; as my father might stir up a rebellion there, and it would be rather awkward to have to fight against him."

But if we have been more fortunate in our rule in India than the Russians thought likely, there is no possible doubt that theirs has received some very hard blows in the Caucasus. The natives have at last begun to understand that they can get more by combination than by the division amongst themselves so sedulously, and to my mind stupidly, fostered by the late Viceroy. As I have pointed out elsewhere, the Russians "have singularly misunderstood the conquered inhabitants of the Caucasus, who surpass them in everything except the power of rifle and sword. To these chivalrous, excitable, poetic, high-souled, romantic, yet unpractical races, they offer the yoke of Slâv mysticism, dreamy and somnolent. . . . The result of Russia's fifty years' occupation has been to institute a chaos of war. She will probably now have to conquer the country over again." Count Vorontzoff-Dashkoff telegraphed in January that the situation in the Caucasus was improving, insomuch that the soldiers sent from Tiflis to open communications with Batûm, and thus between the Black and Caspian Seas, had arrived at Rion, the junction for Kutaïs; this is true. To do this they had to clear the tunnel on the Batûm-Bakû railway near Michaelovo. It had been closed by sending

¹ Blackwood's Mag., No. MLXXXII.

locomotives without drivers from its opposite ends to collide in the middle. The grenadiers were received with a hot fire at the village of Krivilly, in the lovely gorge of the river of that name, by the insurgents, whom they dispersed; but around Kutais the disturbances continue. The Gûrians and Mingreliâns are in full revolt in the mountains, and until the summer comes there is no chance of the district being pacified. In Kutais itself the Chief of the Police was mortally wounded in the centre of the town, close to the open space near the bazaar, on 8th February. Although the attack took place in broad daylight within hail of the police station and barracks, the assassin escaped. The troops surrounded the town. That measure will scarcely suffice; the disloyalty of the people is deep-seated. All the reserve regiments drawn from the locality are tainted with it. As for the real Russian troops, of whom there are some 200,000 in the Caucasus, they are disposed over an area 700 miles in extent from west to east, and hate their garrisons. Although their fidelity is not doubtful, the difficulties of operating in a country four times as large as Switzerland and far less developed as to communications, are such as can scarcely be imagined by those accustomed to dwell in the plains of Europe or amongst our comparatively tiny Scottish or Welsh mountains.

A word on the geological formation of the stupendous range that, separating Europe from Asia, runs from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea. The chain of the Caucasus is a fold or group of folds. It exhibits, in Fâvre's words, a crystalline nucleus, fringed on either side by sedimentary rocks of later date, which have been successively deposited over it, not in unbroken sequence or conformity. The Caucasus is more like the Pyrenees than the Alps, but its peaks are higher than those of the latter chain. From under this mass of crystalline schists, gneiss, granite, and syenites, whose highest mountains, Shkâra and Dzhâhtau, are over 17,000 feet high, whilst some twenty other peaks overtop Mont Blanc; the volcanic lavas have burst an issue in two places, superposing two distinct masses of basalt and trachytes. The western of these masses is Elbrûz, or Mingi Tau, 18,370 feet above the Black Sea level, whose twin mamelons can be seen from the steamer when off Otchemchiry. The eastern is Kazbek, or Kasbek (16,546 feet), whose basalt crest is about 120 miles from the Monarch of the Mountains. The sugar loaf of Tetnûld, that, rising almost 16,000 feet above the beholder, forms so beautiful a feature in the view from Kutais, is merely one of the numerous crystalline rocks above mentioned, similar in construction and composition to those of the Alps, so well known to travellers.

It is curious to notice the horror of many Russians for mountains. I was often asked how I could bear to ride or drive among the cretaceous giants of Dâghestân, the sight of which was an unending joy and delight to eyes wearied of the monotony of the plains. Elbrûz is celebrated by Æschylus as the mountain to which Prometheus was bound. In the museum at Tiflis the heroic form of the fire-stealer is represented by a modern artist in a splendid fresco. On the same wall, Jason, for whom the Grand Duke Nicholas Michaelovitch stood as model, is depicted in golden greaves and helm, about to embark on the grey and rapid waves of the Phasis. For the oldest of the rowers of the boat into which he is about to enter, my friend the late Dr. Gustavus Raddé sat. The Phasis, from whose banks

the pheasants, by the way, came, is the Rion of to-day. Ovid describes its waters swollen with melted snows (Met. VII., 6), *Rapidas limosi Phasidos undas*, than which can be no truer word-picture. In the upper reaches of this stream—for Mingrelia is the Colchis of old—were tributaries where, as now, the sand was washed for shining particles. The “golden fleece” was that of a ram dipped therein and obtained by Medea. Worse than the combats of the armed men who sprung up from the dragon’s teeth sown in the fields of Æetes, the King, are the interminable broils and battles that devastate the modern Mingrelia.

The express vessels of the Black Sea Navigation Company that run from Odessa to Batûm stop only three times, but the slower steamers touch at many interesting and little-known places. At Psezûapé the first glimpse of the snow peaks of the Caucasus is obtained, for although the hills run down to the water at Noyorossisk, they are tame and uninteresting in outline. Covered with wood, they hide still greater forests. At night the charcoal burners’ fires dot the hills with tongues of flame. The *Krasnie Liess*, or Red Forest, a huge domain of half a million acres, is rented from the State by the Grand Duke Serge Michaelovitch. This tract of country extends for a distance of some 75 miles, from the Laba to the Kubân river, on the north slope of the mountain chain. In its varied mountains, plains, and valleys can be found all sorts of game. Here are chamois and ibex, fat quails in the sun-flower gardens, wild boar, *tûr*, bear, and mighty aurochs. This, the last of the European bisons, is found in a wild state only in these parts, for the animals of the breed at Gatchina and Bieloviesch are comparatively tame creatures that have been acclimatized. The *zubr*, as the aurochs is locally called, is now extremely rare, and as the cultivators gradually creep up the mountains from the plains, he will become more so. Dr. Raddé told me that the Grand Duke computed that there were some three hundred aurochs still alive, “but,” he added with a shrug of the shoulders, “*vielleicht dreizig*.” It is really impossible to estimate the numbers of these shy denizens of the mountain forests, who have but the Dryades for companions. The Grand Duke Serge Michaelovitch has shot a few; but by no means bags one every year. M. E. Demidoff, Prince San Donato, accounts for one, of which a splendid illustration, “Dead Aurochs, *Bos Urus*,” appears as frontispiece to his interesting book, “Hunting Trips in the Caucasus,” published by Rowland Ward. Count Charles, now Prince, Kinsky gave me a thrilling account of another aurochs hunt. He had been stalking all the morning and had noticed the marks on the trees where the big bison had rubbed themselves, but had seen no game. Whilst resting for lunch under a rock near a stream, he heard a heavy snorting above his head, and to his regret, for his rifle was a yard or two off, saw a magnificent aurochs gazing quietly at him. He dashed for his rifle and gave him a bullet, but the bull had turned. He followed the marks of the blood over hill and dale for eight hours, but did not bag the game. His description of the splendid appearance of the animal, and of his own alternate hopes and fears, which he gave to me a few days after in the Hôtel de Londres at Tiflis, was enthralling. Those who know this clever and modest sportsman, the same who rode “Zoedone” to victory in the Grand National some twenty years ago, may imagine how interesting was the story.

The next port after Psezûapé is Sochi. The vegetation is sub-tropical in its luxuriance, palms and eucalyptus on the coast, backed by magnificent trees on which the lianes hang, and to which the wild vines cling. The climate here and at the next halt, Adler, is hot and feverish. The mountains rise up like a wall, only a few miles inland, and the aspect is due south. At Gâgry the Grand Duke of Oldenburg has caused an enormous hotel to be built. The estate was for a time managed by a friend of mine, a Colonel in the Préobrajensky Regiment of Foot Guards. I believe it has been anything but a financial success. The house is a splendid building with every comfort and luxury. The resources of the place are but meagre, though the winter climate is superior to that of the Italian Riviera. But the sportsmen who might be attracted by the masses of cock and boar in the vicinity would be content with more modest surroundings, whilst amusements, as understood by the world or half-world of the Riviera, are absent. The peasants who come on board at these little places are not in the least Russian. Some of them are swarthy, turbaned Turks, in the quaint baggy-seated breeches affected by the faithful. Greek and Armenian traders, Abkhazians in the flowing *bourka*, or black felt sleeveless cloak worn all over the Caucasus, but originally made by the Lesgians; and women in yaskmaks. These people congregate on deck, where, if the weather be fine, they constitute picturesque groups, or, if the waves dance, heaps of misery. On the third day out from Sevastopol the ship lies off Novy Afôn.

Few places in the world occupy a more picturesque position than this convent, founded in 1876 by the monks of Mount Athos. An old church hard by has been restored and beautified, and many buildings—perhaps a little too new in appearance—cluster around. The winding road to the beach directly below the monastery passes between cypresses and olive trees, and gardens called into existence by the labour of the monks. It is they who row the twelve-oared galley that puts out to the steamer for the goods sent from Russia by the faithful of the Orthodox Church. No women are allowed in the precincts of Novy Afôn (New Athos), but the good monks are not so ungallant as to refuse them a place in the galley if they wish to land. As we steamed away, the sun, rising above the *Faila*, or steep cliffs to the east, lit up the silver painted bulbs and domes of the monastery, that reflected their images in the placid waters of the Euxine. Crowded with turbaned Turks with their multi-coloured baggage, the big galley, responding to the regular splash of the oars wielded by the monks, formed a picture in the first plane. In the third were the summits of the lower spurs of the mountains, half hidden by the mists, now gradually pierced and dissolved. The steamer put her bows straight for the rising sun, and in a couple of hours covered the 20 miles that separate Novy Afôn from Sukkhûm-Kalé. This place has been the centre of disaffection in Abkhasia. It appears probable that arms and ammunition have been landed here and passed to the insurgents in Sûanetia, by the rough road up the Kodor Valley, that passes over the col or gap of Khukorski. The Russians attempted to prevent the universal wearing of arms in the Caucasus by an edict issued a few yaers ago; but it is not easy to change the customs of a people by *ukâz*. The Viceroy's order held good in the towns and in the plains of Georgia, but was a dead-letter in the mountains.

At Ochemchiry the lower mountain chain recedes from the sea-shore. The foreground is covered by the dense scrub that shows the tracks of the Ingûr and Rion rivers. But if the view of the country in the immediate neighbourhood is tame, that of the mountain chain is romantically wild. For hours the successive peaks pass in irregular grandeur before the eye. Here are the twin mamelons of Elbrûz. This, says Arrian, quoted by Freshfield in his magnificent work, "The Exploration of the Caucasus," is where "it is fabled Prometheus was chained by Hephæstus by the orders of Zeus." The name of Elbrûz was Strobilus. The ancient remains of Dioskûrias are recalled to mind by the Cape Iskûria of to-day. According to Strabo and Pliny, the mountaineers climbed over the passes before alluded to with the aid of climbing-irons. Douglas Freshfield obtained one that had been dug up in a cemetery near the Georgian military road, that triumph of engineering which, passing through the country of the Ossetes, or Ossetians, unites Tiflis and Vladikâvkas. The captains and crews of the steamers are generally very ignorant as to the names of the mountains; but as far as I could identify these from the map in my hands, they came into view in something like the following order: Psych Tau, Elbrûz, Baltakaia, Shkâra, Dykh Tau, and, in the far distance, the wall of the Adai-Koch, at least one hundred miles away from the deck of the steamer.

Poti is a deserted and fever-stricken port that has been killed by the competition of Batûm. On the latter place the Russians have expended a good deal of money and trouble. There used generally to be four or five British steamers at any time along the well-built mole. The *Messageries Maritimes* run a regular service from Batûm, *viâ* Trebizond and Sinope, to Constantinople and the west. The town is clean and well laid out. A mosque with slender minaret recalls the dominion of the Turks. Guns point out to sea from every direction. The forts on the water's edge are too near the town; their guns, mounted *en barbette*, offer an enticing target to a big ship in the offing armed with 12-inch guns; but some forts, hidden in the foliage on the hill, would be difficult to locate, and their plunging fire dangerous to shipping. The rhododendrons, alternating with the tea plantations, give an aspect of greenery that is delightful in the Tchakya Valley; but Batûm is principally interesting as the door to better things. Its population, composed of heterogeneous elements, is neither attractive nor hospitable; its hotels are not of the first order, though better than those of most provincial towns in Russia. The British Consul-General, Mr. Stevens, has a charming house on the new boulevard. Leaving Batûm at 8.45 a.m., we arrived at Rion in a few hours. Here we changed carriages, being not sorry to get away from our travelling companion, a Russian lady, who tore chickens to pieces with her fingers, throwing the bones out to windward, whence they fell in a greasy shower over the carriage. Kutais is reached at 1.10 p.m. The town is most picturesque, and is surrounded by vineyards. The Rion, swollen by the rains, rushed under the stone arches of the old bridge, close to which were the quaint wooden buildings of the bazaars. In the unpaved and unmetalled streets, tiny oxen drew *arbas* and "dug-outs," formed of a single giant tree, through the deep mud. In such a wine-press did the must foam, 2,000 years ago, "round the white feet of laughing girls, whose sires had marched to Rome."

It is possible to obtain very good phaetons with three horses harnessed abreast—*troika*, in a word—at Kutais. It was my wish to drive from here to Abas-Tumân, across the Southern Caucasus range, whose snow-clad sierra forms the horizon in the landscape; but unfortunately the snow in the pass was too deep, and the journey had to be abandoned. So we consoled ourselves with a drive to the monastery of Gelati, only ten or twelve miles to the north of the town. The road leads through the beautiful valley of the Rion, whose giant walnut trees furnish much wood to the Parisian cabinet-makers; then, ascending the hill, passes over the col dividing the water-sheds of the first range. From here a magnificent view is obtained to the north. In the foreground the noble limestone castle crags rise in curious unconformity, the strata now horizontal, now twisted in every direction, now almost vertical. At our feet was the deep gorge studded with myrtles and rhododendrons, through which Rion's glacier-swollen waters rushed noisily. In the distance stood out against the cobalt sky the sugar-loaf sentinel of Tetnuld, or Balta-Kaia. To the south was the chain of the Lesser Caucasus, and between it and us lay the plains of Phasis, the Colchis of Æetes, the King. The church of the monastery at Gelati is a beautiful structure with Norman dog-tooth arches, and a splendid mosaic depicting a scene in the reign of King David the Renovator, some 800 years ago. Amongst other precious relics is shown the crown of the Imeretian Kings. Close to the church are the magnificent iron gates of Ganja, now called Elisavètpol, that the Renovator carried off to decorate his own tomb. From this spot we could discover the road winding up the valley of the Tskhal-Tzitheli (Red River), an affluent of the Krivily, which leads to the Mamisson Pass, over the Adai-Khokh, and down the gorge of the Ardon to Vladikavkas over the mountains.

It is curious to recall the peaceful scene now when the country is torn by dissensions. The men were at work in vine-yards, the women spinning at the cottage doors, the village smith hammering quaint-shaped utensils of copper, red as gold. This country produces all things that man can desire—bread, wine, milk, and honey. What is to be its future? Are the Imeretians to disappear like their neighbours the Abkhazians, leaving scarcely a trace behind them? They are the most beautiful amongst the Caucasians, the progenitors of the white race. As we drove back to Kutais we passed four men, evidently representing three generations, in charge of a wine press drawn by black water-buffaloes. Each of these fellows, from the grey grandsire of seventy to his grandson of eighteen, were types of manly activity and beauty. The women and children were dark-haired angels and cherubs, with soft and melting eyes. The disastrous policy of inflaming the tenants or occupiers against the landlords or possessors of the soil has been carried on by Russia with fatal results. For the moment both have sunk their grievances and are united against the common enemy. There are practically no signs of a termination of this war against authority. Far off in the Suanetian valleys, where the azaleas stand out bright against the giant ferns, the charcoal is being burnt in stacks. The mountaineers will bring down sulphur, and saltpetre is sold in Batûm or Sukkhûm for the ostensible purpose of curing the flesh of the local hogs. It is difficult to prevent the manufacture of explosives; but why should *kindjals*, or sharp daggers, and guns and rifles be made in every bazaar from Kutais to Tiflis?

The Russians seem unable to decide on either a policy of conciliation or repression. The latter is difficult. The bridges over the mountain streams can be destroyed by the peasants, who retire to their fastnesses in the limestone caves that they share with the bats and vultures. The heavily-laden Russian soldiers cannot follow them. The conflict may go on for years, as did that against Schamyl in Dâghestân. These mountain races do not seem fitted for self-government. History shows us that they have been in succession the sport of Armenians, Georgians, Persians, Turks, and Russians. Probably the best way out of the difficulty would be to conciliate the local chieftains or princes, the Dadish Kilians, the Atars, the Bagrations, and others, whose influence with the people is much like that of the Scottish chiefs of clans. But this is an alternative that the Government of the Emperor does not seem inclined to consider.