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UNKNOWN MONGOLIA

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A Record of Travel and Exploration in
North-West Mongolia and Dzungaria

BY
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GOLD MEDALLIST OF THE ROYAL GEOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY

WITH THREE CHAPTERS ON SPORT

BY
J. H. MILLER, F.Z.S.

AND A FOREWORD BY
THE RIGHT HON. EARL CURZON OF KEDLESTON,
G.C.S.I., Etc.

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CHAPTER XI

SPORT ON THE PLATEAUX OF MONGOLIA

By J. H. MILLER

THE north-west corner of Mongolia has many beauties in summer. Its round-headed bluffs of dark shale, slashed with snow-drifts, rise from rolling downlands covered with a luxurious growth of short, yellow-green grass, brightened by brilliant patches of gentians, crocuses, edelweiss, and other Alpine flowers. Its innocent-looking, but treacherous, bogs give birth to sparkling streams, which form the numerous rivers that flow through barren foot-hills on to still more arid plains, and terminate in large saline lakes. Groups of the dome-shaped tents of the nomads are scattered over the plateaux, and, wherever grass is plentiful, along the edge of both river and lake ; countless flocks and herds, the only wealth of their wandering owners, dot this matchless pasture-land, and from a cloudless sky a brilliant sun beats down upon plain and plateau.

In winter this land of extremes presents a very different picture ; everything is then locked in the grip of the frost fiend ; snow lies everywhere, except on the exposed tops which the pitiless wind blows clear,

and geese "flighted" out on to the boggy grass-land. Owing to the laws of Buddhism, which prohibit the unnecessary taking of life, and, no doubt, partly through laziness, the natives on no account molest these wild-fowl. The birds therefore show a marked indifference to the presence of man, allowing a horseman to ride within 50 yards of them, or less, without doing more than raise their heads. But, as we soon discovered, an attempt to approach them on foot was courting failure, for they would not allow us within 200 yards. The reason for this is that a Mongol hardly ever walks. Even to go from one yurt to another, a distance of perhaps not more than a few hundred yards, he will always mount a horse, which is kept ready saddled and tied to his yurt for the purpose.

We devised a scheme at length, by which we were able to secure several fine fat geese with a rook-rifle. One would ride and lead the other's horse, taking a line which would bring us within 50 yards of the flock. Then the second, who had been walking concealed behind the led horse, would fall to the ground behind some slight cover, and get a steady shot, while the eyes of the birds were on the retreating horses and man.

In this district we came across an encampment of Russians and Tartars. They had been travelling about during the summer, trading with the natives, and had collected large quantities of wool, hides, and marmot-skins, in exchange for cloth, tobacco, cooking utensils, etc., and sometimes for money. They were working for one of the large merchants at Biisk. The profits must have been very great. Take the marmot-skins, for instance. They are purchased in thousands at an absurdly low price (10 to 20 kopeks each), and sent

to Europe, where they are dyed and sold as imitation sable. The wool is purchased from the natives for 3 to 4 roubles per poud (36 lb.) or the equivalent in kine, and sold later for double that amount. The trade is largely in the hands of the Chinese, who sell to the Russian merchants, which minimizes the profits of the latter. However, Russia has already inserted "the thin end of the wedge" in Mongolia, and with the new state of affairs the entire trade of this vast country will fall into the hands of Russia.

Properly administered, there is no reason why this ideal grazing country should not become one of the leading stock-rearing countries of the world. If a branch line to Kobdo, from the proposed Kiakhta-Kalgan railway, is built, the whole of North-west Mongolia will be brought within rail-communication of the European market, and this land of great possibilities will have received the stimulus it requires. There is every likelihood of this line some day being continued through to Tomsk, via the thriving town of Biisk, engineers having pronounced the Altai highlands to present no serious engineering difficulties.

Having changed our mixed caravan of oxen and horses for eight camels, on August 28th we started again for the frontier post of Suok, hoping there to get hold of some hunters. A march of six hours took us out of the Achit plain, well up into the foot-hills of the Altai. Marching up a dry water-course, we were struck by the arid nature of the hills. Above the valley bottom, where there was a little scrub and coarse grass, the hillsides were entirely devoid of growth, with the exception of the ubiquitous "burtsa"—a small bush, which when dry makes excellent fuel. On the following

the lofty, jagged peaks of the Great Altai rose up and formed a marked contrast to the featureless country, through which we had been marching for the last few days.

We pitched our camp close to a cluster of yurts. In exchange for a few safety-pins and a yard or two of scarlet ribbon, we got as much milk and fuel as we could want. On the following morning we saw an imposing-looking cavalcade approaching: it turned out to be the chief of the Altai Uriankhai and his retainers. He was a cheery old soul, and plied us with questions incessantly. How far was it to London? How many horses, cattle, and sheep had we? What did we pay for our wives in England, and how many did we each have? To all these and many more questions Makan-daroff found suitable replies, which, if not truthful, certainly did not belittle us in any way. As the success or failure of our 'sheep'-hunt depended on getting on the right side of the old fellow, we presented him with an old telescope which had been brought from England for such a purpose. His pleasure was almost pathetic, and, when it was focussed on to some horses a mile away, he giggled with childish delight. From that moment our success, as far as he was concerned, was assured. We were promised horses and men for the following day.

As usual, we had the greatest difficulty in convincing the men that it was only the old rams we wished to shoot, on account of their horns. This was more than they could grasp. What use could we make of "koshgor" horns? Perhaps we made them into medicine, as the Chinese did with the maral horns. But if it was the horns we wanted, why didn't we pick

up those which were lying about on the ground? We could collect a hundred in a day, and an old koshgor running wild over the hills was so hard to get near. At last, after much chatter, a grizzled old veteran pushed his way to the front. He understood what we wanted. Some years before he had been, he said, a caravan-man to two white koshgor-hunters¹ like ourselves. He was a marmot-hunter by profession, and had plied his trade for some thirty years. Though he had never bothered much about the "rams," it being much easier to get within shot of females with his old muzzle-loader, yet he knew where they were, and guaranteed to take us to a place where we should see large numbers every day. The nearest way to reach the best place which he knew of was to retrace our steps as far as Belota and strike up west from there.

While Carruthers and Price spent the day after wild-fowl, I took a man with me and climbed on to the plateau-like top of the Bain-Khairkhan ridge, which protrudes eastwards from the main divide between the Suok and Chagan-gol Rivers, in a solid round-headed block rising 8,000 or 9,000 ft.

It was delightful on this invigorating autumn day, with the sun shining down from a clear still sky, to move from one ridge to another, spying the ground ahead from each vantage-point, whilst lying comfortably on the short, springy turf. Some wild life was almost continually in view. We saw marmots, snow-cock, a wolf, a small herd of ewes and young, and five young rams that day. I decided to try and shoot one of the rams for meat, but it was terribly difficult stalking country, and, in spite of the most snake-like wriggling,

¹ Probably Prince Demidoff and Mr. St. George Littledale.

pair of field-glasses, or an automatic pistol, and request him politely but firmly, to supply you with men for as long as you wish to remain in his district. On this occasion I had all the men up and pointed out, through Makandaroff, that if there was any more grumbling, we would report the matter to the authorities at Suok, and have them severely beaten. This quieted them for the time, but they continued to work in a very half-hearted manner.

Carruthers did not get back to camp till a late hour that night. As it began to grow dark we became a little anxious, for to spend the night out without food or fire, and with 20 degrees of frost, would be anything but a cheerful experience. As large a fire as possible was kept going with the limited supply of dry horse-dung at our disposal, and every half-hour both barrels of the 12-bore were fired off. At about nine o'clock horses were heard approaching, and Carruthers and his men rode into camp. It appeared that a band of "rams" had only been found late in the afternoon, and that by the time he had got within shot it was getting dark. He brought in one head, and had hopes of retrieving, on the following day, two more beasts that he had hit, it being too late to follow them up at the time.

It was one of those glorious, crisp, still mornings, which one associates with the plateaux of Central Asia in their most pleasant moods, as we sallied out on the following day, and I felt thoroughly in tune with the inspiring scene around me. As the old man and I rode along over the springy turf, the shrill whistle of the marmots resounded on every hand. By the autumn these jolly animals have amassed such quantities of fat, preparatory to their winter sleep, that they present

a most comical appearance. Their short legs are almost invisible, and, as they make for their holes, they look just like large muffs rolling down the hillside. Though these animals, along with the snowcock, add greatly to the picturesqueness of the scene, they are no friends of the hunter. On several occasions, whilst after sheep or ibex, my stalk has been spoilt either by the whistle of a marmot, whose quickness of eyesight is almost unequalled, or by the weird cries of a covey of snowcock as they sailed out over the valley.

During the morning we came across a marmot-hunter, a wild-looking figure clad in tattered sheep-skins, and armed with an ancient long-barrelled muzzle-loader, with the usual forked rest. During the summer these hunters wander about the hills, carrying nothing in the way of food except a goat-skin sack of "kummis" and a small bag of salt, tied to their saddles. They rely almost entirely on marmot-flesh for their meat, only occasionally killing a wild-sheep, when an easy opportunity presents itself.

There are two methods of hunting the marmot adopted by these people ; one is merely to make a low breastwork of sods within 30 yards or so of a well-used burrow, and lie patiently behind it till a beast appears ; the other requires slightly greater skill and energy. On locating the marmot outside his hole the hunter advances boldly towards it at a rapid walk, carrying his gun in his right hand, and incessantly waving a bunch of white sheeps'-wool attached to a stick, or a fox's brush, in his left. This unusual sight so excites the curiosity of the marmot that he will often sit bolt-upright at the entrance to his hole, and allow the hunter to approach close enough for a hurried shot.