Notes of a Voyage Across Manchuria.

I.

By Count Vay de Vaya.

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By M. M. Birchal.

At the present moment, when all eyes are turned to the Far East, we hope that the following notes, which we have detached from our Journal may be of some interest. They are only Notes, written from day to day, when still under the impression of the locality and events, and we would feel tempted to excuse ourselves to our readers, were it not that the simplicity of the narrative, and its tone of absolute sincerity, will cause it to be more fully appreciated.

Vay de Vaya et Luskod.

Chapter I.

From the Siberian Frontier to the Station of Mukden.

Am I really in Chinese Territory? Does Manchuria still form part of the Empire of China? Even since we crossed the Frontier two days ago I have not observed the slightest change. Everything around us remains Russian. Our train is run by Russian soldiers; the station masters are military officers, the houses surrounding the stations are occupied by Cossacks. The railway line in its whole length is watched by armed men, and yet, according to the latest reports, public safety is not guaranteed. Hardly a day passes without some crime being reported, and skirmishes are frequent between the Manchu marauders and the Russian troops. The line itself is constantly menaced, the permanent way destroyed and the rails removed. Our train is provided with an armed escort for its protection in case of need. The Chinese Eastern Railway (as it is called, to give it something Chinese, if only the name) is an entirely Russian enterprise; and nobody ignores the fact that its strategical aim is to unite Vladivostock and Port Arthur with Moscow.
NOTES OF A VOYAGE ACROSS MANCHURIA

and St. Petersburg. I can perceive the object as we advance along the line. It is entirely constructed by Russian military engineers, and troops work under the directions of their officers. For the present it is a long way from being finished, and I am, therefore, better able to examine the progress of this interesting undertaking. It is carried on at a great pace; there are thousands of coolies at work under the orders of Cossacks. The earth is brought in wheelbarrows, the sleepers laid down, and the rails rivetted, all at the same time, but by different gangs of workmen. The system is the same as that adopted by General Annenkoff for the Trans-Caspian Railway. I have plenty of time to gather impressions on the way, as there is nothing else to do. We skirt the north-east end of the Desert of Gobi, and if ever a desert deserved the name, it is certainly this one. The Sahara desert has all the charm of the tropics; the desert of Arabia, the beauty of a cloudless sky; the desert of Bikanor, with the golden tints of an Indian sun shining upon it, has a certain fascination; but the desert of Gobi is the land of complete desolation! A leaden sky weighs over a waste of grey sand, or rather dust, and when the wind blows it about in clouds, earth and sky seem to be buried in its dismal shroud! There is not a village in sight, not even a solitary habitation; the only living beings in this dull region are the Russian troops and the coolies working under their orders.

Before going any further, I wish to explain that I am travelling by a goods train. As I have already stated, the line is not finished, the stations not built; station masters and workmen live in sheds or in provisional encampments. There are no booking offices and no issue of tickets. Trains loaded with railway material come and go in both directions, conveying workmen or people connected with the railway. A special permission from the authorities was necessary to allow me to travel by this train. I was prepared to rough it, and the Administration had warned me that nothing was prepared for the convenience of passengers. They would not even promise that I should reach Port Arthur without interruption, as several of the provisional bridges had been swept away by the floods, and the embankments destroyed by the inundations. But they kindly put a special car at my disposal for the whole length of my journey through Manchuria, and this car became my home for several weeks.

To give a better idea of my house on wheels I must say, that although the exterior was modest enough, the interior was all that could be desired in the matter of comfort. It consisted of a sleeping compartment, a dressing room, a study, a corridor, and a small balcony, besides a kitchen and accommodation for a servant. The balcony became my favorite retreat, and there I spent many quiet hours reading and writing, while the dismal land
through which we were passing unfolded itself in all its dreary monotony. At times my car was uncoupled, and I was left for a few days near some interesting spot; then I was again rumbling behind trucks laden with bricks, iron sheets, and all kinds of machinery. The car was my house and my castle. It did indeed look like a castle, standing motionless at the stations, and at times, when a guard appeared from the next waggon, or a patrol from the neighbouring camp, I would have been puzzled to decide whether they were protecting my person from some enemy, or keeping an eye on me! At intervals along the line I observed station houses in course of erection, some had even a roof on. The buildings are modest in appearance, never consisting of more than one floor, with a roofing of black tiles. They imitate the Chinese style of architecture, with turned-up corners. But although unfinished, they seem to have gone through a dreary past, instead of having a brilliant future before them. Around us is always the same dreary outlook, no cultivation, no gardens; the station platforms nothing but swamps where one has to wade through a sea of mud. In some places large stones or a few planks are put down to serve as a crossing for the traveller. As for restaurants—which are so well provided on the Trans-Siberian Railway, where they even have pretensions to luxury—here in Manchuria one can barely get the necessaries of life.

At some stations a sort of apartment is arranged, furnished with a deal table and a bench; and an amateur chef, who looks as if he was making his debut in the profession, serves us with an enormous bowl of cabbage soup, or the national dish kasha, made of buckwheat flour. At some of the branch lines, where trade is more brisk, one can get the piroshki, a favourite dish with Russians. Notwithstanding the primitive state of some of the restaurants—and at times they only consist of a tent and a couple of empty kerosine tins—they are always in great request. On the same principle as that adopted in the construction of the line, Russian chefs employ Chinese servants to do rough work.

While we were thus leisurely crossing Northern Manchuria, I had every opportunity of getting a thorough knowledge of the characteristics of that region. As to its geographical aspect, half the province consists of a barren table-land; further south it is more wooded, and near the towns the ground is pretty well cultivated. The capital of Northern Manchuria is Tsitsihar, where resides a Governor of the province, and it is also the centre of this part of the country. But the town itself is most primitive, and far behind the other two important towns, Kirin and Mukden. The inhabitants are Manchus, Mongols, and Buriates. There is a certain amount of trade carried on, principally in raw produce and skins of all kinds. From very remote
times, caravans have made this town a halting place between the southern provinces and the northern region of the Amur. The carts employed by the natives are of a very primitive kind; I have seen them drawn by sixteen and eighteen ponies, and sometimes by oxen. I am very much amused at the extraordinary complication of the harness, which seems an inextricable mass of ropes and thongs. How it was originally put together is a problem which only Chinese patience can solve. I also have time to study the local customs and habits of the people. In this lonely region, where no Westerner had set foot before the advent of the railway, everything has remained is its primitive state. The people live partly by agriculture and partly by fishing and hunting. Their houses are most wretched, we should call them hovels, built of bricks and dried mud. The inmates huddle together with their cattle and other domestic animals. They are, however, passionately devoted to the breeding of horses, and we pass several large studs. The herds of sheep are also numerous, but the animal most frequently seen is the hog. They are of a different species to ours, having long black bristly hairs, giving them the appearance of wild boars. They swarm in every yard, burrowing in the earth, and giving a most filthy and unpleasant appearance to the neighbourhood of a Manchurian farm. There are also plenty of poultry, geese, ducks and fowls, all sharing the abode of the family. The entrance to each hut is usually guarded by savage dogs, in appearance like wolves and quite as ferocious. I had many narrow escapes of being devoured, and as it is quite impossible to defend oneself, I always filled my pockets with biscuits to propitiate them. Upon the whole, a Manchurian homestead is like a cattle fair, or a Noah’s Ark, and its occupants as antidiluvian. It is a fact that the existence of these people is on a lower level than the Chinese, their appearance is more fierce, their occupations are all out-door ones, and the old Confucian doctrines do not seem to have reached them so far. Their life is more physical than intellectual, and their thoughts more given to battle and war than to moral reflections, and even to this day the whole of the Imperial Guard is composed of Manchus.

We travel slowly, my journey is varied by long stoppages of which I avail myself to make excursions into the interior of the country. I take advantage of any kind of conveyance, carts drawn by oxen, Mongolian ponies, Cossack mounts, in fact anything I can get hold of, enduring much fatigue and discomfort, but finding extraordinary opportunities for gathering information about the country and the people.

We arrive at last at Harbin, that famous town where the three lines of Vladivostock, Port Arthur, and Siberia, meet the Manchurian Railway. Never during the whole course of my travels have I set foot in a more dreary-
looking place. It is a cold damp afternoon in the late autumn, the rain is falling in sheets, and the water nor only descends from above, but seems to filter out of the earth. The river is in flood and the whole country inundated. Half the place is under water and the station building looks like an island in the middle of a swamp. The few passengers for Vladivostock, and myself, are carried pick-a-back to the waiting room, which resembles a haven of refuge. It is crowded with Moujicks, Cossacks, Chinese, and Manchus, all huddled together with their belongings, which consist of a confused mass of bedding, kitchen utensils, and bundles of all shapes and sizes. This kind of barn also serves as a buffet, and at the centre table, having their dinner, are seated about a dozen Russian officers. As an ironical reminder of past luxury, the table is adorned with a huge gilt candelabra, which serves as a centre-piece. But I have no time to admire its beauties, not even time to sit down to the repast, though I am half dead with hunger. The station master appears with a troubled face, and tells me that a bridge near Luhu has been swept away by the rains, and the train can go no further till the damage has been repaired. I can scarcely describe the consternation I feel at this news. I realize the whole extent of my misfortune at having to prolong my stay in this wretched place. The roads are in such bad condition that any excursion is impossible, and I am compelled to remain a prisoner in my waggon. In the meanwhile I accept a seat in a tarentass for a drive round the town.

The only interest that Harbin can offer is in the fact that it is the headquarters of the Russians in Manchuria. The town has sprung up during the last few years, soon after the China-Japan war. It consists of barracks and military quarters, foundries for cannon, workshops for the railway and a few houses for the families of officers, civil servants and railway officials. There is nothing attractive in its aspect, and the town being inundated at the present time, its appearance to me is simply horrible. We pass a few provision stores, and there is also an hotel, which I prefer not to describe, and a café-concert; the latter the only place of amusement for the families of the Russian officials. The population of the town is stated to be 15,000, but are they all dead, asleep, or in hiding? We do not meet a soul during our drive. But this is not surprising, seeing that the water reaches up to our ponies' knees, and the wheels of our conveyance are immersed to the axles at every plunge. My kind friend tries to explain that Harbin is an important military station, destined to play an active part in any forthcoming war. It will be the point of concentration and mobilization of the army, as the town is situated at the point of connection of the three railway lines. Harbin will most likely be the headquarters of the Commissariat and Army Service Corps. Here will also be erected the
hospitals of the Red Cross Society, which will be managed by a large staff. I listen with interest to my friend's hypothesis and plans of the future.

It is quite dark when we finish our drive and return to the station. A most welcome surprise awaits me there. I am informed that a goods train, conveying troops and coolies for repairing the line, will start about midnight. I at once take steps to have my waggon attached to this train. At first prospects are not encouraging. Nobody seems to know how far the train will go; whether the embankments will be strong enough to support its weight; but anything is preferable to a further stay at Harbin; the uncertainty of the future appeals more to me than the certainty of the present. After an interminable night of shakings, noise, coming and going of troops, mad rush of coolies, and general confusion, we make a start at about 3 a.m. The train presents a curious appearance; it consists of open wagons, like platforms, and some trucks in which the troops lie pell-mell, their overcoats serving as bedding, while hundreds of coolies swarm into the wagons. We travel slowly across a vast plain, partly inundated; the permanent way itself often being under water. The line is damaged in several places, and our train has to advance cautiously. Coolies are lowered at times, with their picks and shovels, and materials for repairing the line, and they set to work at once, while orders are shouted to them in a shrill voice by the officials. Our progress is naturally slow, and during the frequent stoppages I have time to observe the country. When we reach Central Manchuria, the geographical aspect changes considerably. The country is more undulating and more wooded. We pass through different valleys watered by winding streams, and surrounded by chains of mountains. The country is even pretty in some parts. The earth is rich, and nature has been prodigal with her gifts; the slopes of the mountains being rich in minerals, and game abundant. The mineral wealth of Manchuria is still unexplored, and the mines of gold, silver and copper, which are worked, are comparatively few. Several syndicates in the southern province have been very successful. But since the Russian occupation, all sorts of difficulties have been put in the way of investors and, except in the open port of Newchwang, the employment of foreign capital has been discouraged.

The superficial area of Central Manchuria is smaller than the Northern or Tsitsihar (which is sometimes called Halungkiang). But the population is nearly double. The centre of the district is Kirin, a town composed of houses built in the old style, yamens with gaudy roofs, temples and pagodas, all extremely picturesque. But the principal sight of Kirin is the Great Wall of China, with its battlements, massive bulwarks, and towers in the shape of pagodas, all combining to make a most imposing mass.
But the beauty of this distant provincial capital is in its surroundings. Mountains and valleys, thick woods and distant blue peaks, all combine to make a most charming landscape. It is a magnificent region, and opens a splendid field to the sportsman and the artist. The mountain streams afford excellent fishing; and leopards, bears, wolves, and a certain kind of deer abound in the forests. The artist has an almost unlimited field for his brush; the lovely landscape, the picturesque corners in the city, and especially the historical monuments, royal mausoleums and ancestral tablets, scattered along the banks of the river, or hidden in sacred groves, all tend towards the making of fine pictures. But the difficulty is to reach these spots. Stations are few along the line, and these are given the names of certain towns on the way, but should a traveller wish to visit the latter, he finds they are twenty to thirty miles distant from the station bearing their name, and often there is no conveyance of any kind to be had, and sometimes not even a road.

The Chinese Eastern Railway seems to carefully avoid all inhabited places, and in its actual state, as long as no branch lines are opened, it cannot possibly have any commercial value. The Russian engineers who traced the route seemed to have but one object in view, viz., to unite Vladivostock and Port Arthur to the Siberian Railway by the shortest and most direct route; so as to facilitate the forwarding of troops when necessary with as little delay as possible. The whole was managed without attracting more attention, or exciting suspicions amongst the natives than was indispensable in such an enterprise.

At the present time one can travel from one end of the line to the other without seeing anything but railway buildings, barracks for troops, pitched camps, and Russian soldiers.

We travel again through vast plains formed of rich pastures, with here and there a field of maize or beans. Cultivation is more apparent, and harvesting is going on in several places. The country has no longer the look of desolation of the Desert of Gobi, but the romantic wildness of Central Manchuria. It is also more populated, and we see men and women working in the fields, a few poor-looking farms, and some miserable huts.

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CHAPTER II.

FROM THE STATION TO THE TOWN OF MUKDEN.

Looking out of my carriage window, I see the dawn breaking forth dark and gloomy. The sky is overcast with heavy clouds, and the rain is falling in torrents. The train comes to a standstill in front of a sea of mud, the railway platform being entirely under water. It does not require a great
stretch of imagination, amid this general deluge; to fancy oneself stepping out of the Ark. There is a small one-story building in the distance, which looks more like a peasant's hut than anything else, and I can scarcely believe it to be the station of Mukden, the capital of Manchuria. Here I am informed that our train can go no further for the present. It may proceed to-morrow, or next day, or perhaps within a week. I thus have time to visit Mukden, although the town is twenty-five miles distant. But how to get there? I see no road, and no vehicle of any kind in sight. I make enquiries of the station master, who is a Russian officer with a long fair beard, and a uniform covered with gold braid. He advises me to send my interpreter to one of the neighbouring farms, where I may be able to hire a Chinese cart with a driver and team of mules, to take me to Mukden in as short a time as the state of the roads will allow. My interpreter wastes half the day gossiping with the farmers, and I spend the time noting down my impressions.

The rain continues to fall in torrents, and my car is shaken by the furious gusts of wind, and the lead covered roof threatens to collapse. The afternoon is almost at an end when my faithful Sancho appears, and with him a sort of cart, with three mules harnessed tandem fashion, and driven by a small pig-tailed Chinaman. I cannot deny that my turnout is at least picturesque. The cart is painted yellow, the awning is blue, the mules are grey, and the diminutive driver shelters himself under an umbrella of bright yellow oiled paper. But if picturesque, it is far from comfortable. It has no springs and no seat. The body of the car is simply a wooden box, about $2\frac{1}{2}$ feet square, where it is necessary to squat like a Turk or a tailor, and not being either, I began to suffer agonies at the end of the first five minutes. The only commodity in the cart is a small strip of cotton cloth to serve as a cushion which is a poor protection against the hard wood of Manchuria. I rather hesitate to trust myself to such a rude conveyance, and I do not at all relish the idea of a night's travel in it. But I promised to visit the site of our Mission, which was destroyed by the Boxers in the last insurrection, and was the scene of much suffering and martyrdom. Finally, I decide to proceed.

The small driver, Li Hu, cracks his whip, which more resembles a fishing rod, and truly he might go in for the sport, for our mules are wading in liquid mud the colour of chocolate. The first object to attract my attention on the road is a large one-storied building, used as a barrack and full of Cossacks. It is really an encampment for the protection of the station. We then do quite a long run without seeing anything particular. There are fields on either side of the road, but these are now invisible, like Egypt when the Nile is in flood.
I presume that we are on a high road, for we advance between rows of
trees planted rather irregularly. This road must have been paved originally,
perhaps centuries ago, for it is excessively rough going. I find I am not
mistaken in its antiquity when we arrive at a bridge spanning a creek. It
must have been a fine bridge originally, carved in the Chinese style of
architecture, and, after scraping the mud off a small part of it, so as to
examine it more closely, I find it is made of white marble. After crossing
this bridge the road seems to get worse. I am jolted about from side to side
and from top to bottom, my head coming into contact with the framework of
wood of the hood. After a couple of miles I can stand it no longer, so leave
the cart and climb on to the back of one of the mules. But riding astride a
lean Manchurian mule without a saddle is not comfortable either and I am
in despair. Here I am alone in a strange country, surrounded by a dreary
desert, which seems doubly so in its inundated condition, the rain falling as if
all the cataracts in the sky had been opened; at the mercy of a driver who
might be an assassin for all I know. My knowledge of the language is con­
fined to two words—howdi and poohow (they may be spelt differently, but the
sound is as above) the first of which signifies all that is nice and pleasant, and
the second quite the reverse. I have no occasion to use the former, but I am
tired of repeating the latter, seeing its inability to improve the situation.

We meet another cart, similar to mine, in which I count at least
ten people; four are perched on the shafts, others ride the mules, some
are on the top of the hood, and I cannot guess how many are inside. All the
travellers carry enormous yellow umbrellas and look like so many hung
sunflowers. It is really a moral lesson to see people so happy in such
conditions, they laugh and talk all the time, and I shake the water from my
saturated clothes and feel a little better. But as night advances, and the
desolation becomes more appaling, I find my courage waning from hour to
hour. Everything in the landscape seems magnified in the darkness into most
fantastic objects. The lights of distant farms appear to me like will-o' the
wisps, the trees like so many ghosts, and the howling dogs make me think of
the nursery tales about dragons, which were always denizens of the Yellow
Empire. All the fairy tales of my youth return to my memory, the present
reality seeming to give them substance. The many books I have lately read
about travels in Manchuria make me diffident about continuing my journey.
I am not ignorant of the rumours of revolt and suppressed excitement among
the natives. Bands of Boxers are said to roam about the country, burning
farms, sacking villages, and murdering travellers. The Cossacks have frequent
skirmishes with them, and on more than one occasion we heard shots fired
while passing through, in the train. Of all these marauders the Hunghutzes
are the most terrible. They form a body of men more or less organized, like
the Italian brigands of old times, and this band resembles the Sicilian Mafia
in the extent of its influence.

It is now very late and we have been travelling for hours without the
sight of a human habitation. I cannot ask anything of Li Hu, reduced as I
am to poohow, howdi, and should Li Hu be in a humour to entertain
me I could not understand a word, of course. So we continue our silent and
gloomy journey, I still perched on a mule, and Li Hu, who has the cart to
himself, rolls himself round like a serpent, and seeks consolation in dreams.

Finally the will-o'-the-wisps get nearer, the ghosts take the shape of
ordinary trees, and the howling of the dragons resolves itself into the barking
of dogs. I dare not hope that I have reached my destination, for fear of
disappointment. Li Hu continues asleep, but the mules lead on towards a
miserable looking house and stop short at the door, as if by instinct, and
the same instinct awakens Li Hu. I eagerly question the latter, "Mukden?"
He shakes his head and I see my error. The landlord comes out and his
appearance in no more pleasing than the thick clouds of opium smoke that
issue from the interior of the house. I should prefer remaining on my mule,
as I am not inclined to stretch my legs in the mud. But the team is
unharnessed, and I have no choice but to enter. The sight of that room is
horrible, it puts me in mind of the cave of a sorceress. Nothing is wanting
to give it that appearance; a kettle hanging from the chimney; enormous
logs of wood on the hearth, giving out a sulphurous flame in the glow of
which I see the forbidding faces of the occupants of the room. There are
about a dozen men squatting on the floor, others are lying on the earthen
bench, which is built all round the room. Everyone is smoking opium out
of metal pipes. At my entrance they seem to waken from their torpor, and in
their small eyes I perceive a combination of astonishment, curiosity, mistrust
and hatred. All the hostility of the Eastern race against the Western can
be read in their looks. The bad feelings of the Yellow Race towards the
"foreign devils" is depicted on their countenances in all its strength and
bitterness. I must confess I feel far from happy in this novel company. It
is only my passionate devotion to the study of human nature, and the interest
these people inspire me with, that sustains my courage. What will happen?
Will they kill me? They begin to cross-examine Li Hu, and it is a real
treat to watch the discussion. Without understanding a word that is said I
find it easy to follow their questions. Who is he? Where is he going? Does he carry anything with him? To judge from Li Hu's expression, I
gather that the particulars are not satisfactory. At the same time I observe
with much interest with what skill he manages to contrive the tale which will
be of the most advantage to himself. There are two strong arguments in my favour; the first is that I have not yet paid him anything, and the second, that the station-master, who knows him, specially entrusted my person to his care. He also does everything to refrain from exciting their cupidity. So he is silent about my special car, and to judge by his expression, and the way he turns his pockets inside out, I gather that he is representing me as a poor missionary going to draw some money from the Bank in Mukden, and whose abduction will bring no profit to anybody.

The minutes drag on like hours and the night as an eternity. Therefore to pass the time I begin to draw with coloured pencils. Is it that the men are interested in my work? I know not, but they crowd round me, and never have I had such amiable spectators. The same men who, a few minutes ago, were ready to take my life, or at least my purse, now become my friends. Like Orpheus' lyre, my pencils do wonders; they tame the savage nature and soothe the passions of these brigands. It is the greatest triumph my modest pencils have ever achieved for me.

At last there is a general movement. Li Hu prepares the carriage, and we start again on our voyage of exploration. It is still dark, but the rain has ceased, and the cold light of the moon appears between the clouds. By its gleam I perceive the dark outline of a pagoda on the horizon. We are nearing the end of our journey. We have left the so-called high road, and are jolted and knocked about through fields of barley and maize. The day dawns as we arrive at the principal gate of Mukden, and after the night of darkness and perils the glory of its appearance is heightened in my eyes. The sky is cloudless, as blue as if it had been carved out of a block of turquoise. The richly carved frontage of the houses shines with an Oriental splendour. It is the hour when the people leave the town for their daily tasks in the fields. They are all dressed in light stuffs, which give a charming effect. Everything breathes happiness. It is the victory of the day over the night. The sun like a great magician has scattered the clouds and darkness with his magic wand, and thrown a veil of forgetfulness over the sadness and misery of the past.