ON the Karakorum Pass, at nineteen thousand five hundred feet—on this highway, the loftiest in the world, the groom Goorban began to question me:

"What is it that has been secreted in these heights? It must be that a great treasure has been hidden hereabouts, surely the way to this place is arduous. Having traversed all the passes, one may chance upon a smooth vault. Something tinkles under the horses' hoofs. It must be that here are great secrets, but the entry-way to them we do not know. When will there be revealed writings in books, where and what has been secreted?"

All around this majestic Karakorum Pass the white peaks glistened dazzlingly. All around us without a break was uplifted a most brilliant scintillation. On the path itself, as if for a reminder, were a great quantity of whitened bones. Were not some of these wayfarers going for treasures? Indeed, countless caravans have crossed the Karakorum for riches.

Here I am reminded about another tradition concerning treasure. In Italy, at Orvieto, they related to me a remarkable legend about secreted artistic treasures. The story concerned either Duccio himself or one of his contemporaries. It was told in a lofty style which goes so well with the mellifluous Italian language.

"Just as it is nowadays, in olden times the best artists were not always understood. To the beclouded eye it has been difficult to evaluate forms, particularly lofty ones. People have demanded only the observance of old rules, but often beauty has not been accessible to them. Thus it happened with the great artist about whom we are speaking. His best pictures, instead of exaltingly touching the hearts of people, were subjected to condemnations and mockery. For a long time the artist endured this unjust attitude toward himself.

"In divine ecstasy he continued to create many masterpieces.

"Once he depicted a very marvellous Madonna, but the envious prevented the hanging of this image in its pre-destined place. And this happened not once nor twice but several times. When the viper begins to creep in, it invades both palace and hovel.

"But the artist, made wiser and knowing the madness of the crowd, was not distressed. He said: "It has been given the bird to sing, and to me have been given forces for glorifying lofty forms. As long as the bird lives it fills God's world with song. And so while I am alive, I shall also glorify it. Since the envious and the ignorant put obstacles in the way of my works, I shall not lead the evil into worse bitterness of heart. I shall collect the pictures rejected by them, I shall store them securely in oaken chests and, availing myself of the good-will of my friend the abbot, I shall hide them in the deep cellars of the monastery. When the ordained day shall come, future generations will discover them. If, then, by the will of the Creator they must remain in secret—let it be so!"
No one knows in precisely what monastery, in what secret vaults the artist concealed his creations. True, in certain cloisters it has happened that old pictures have been found in crypts. But they have been found singly; they have not been purposefully deposited there and therefore could not belong to the treasure secreted by the great artist. Indeed in the underground vaults they continue to sing “Gloria in Excelsis,” but the searchers have not been lucky enough to find what was indicated by the artist himself.

Certainly we have many monasteries and still more temples and castles which lie in ruins. Who knows, perhaps, the tradition relates to one of these remains, already destroyed and razed by time.

From this time on, people thought that the great artist had ceased painting. But, hearing these suppositions, he only smiled, because henceforth he was not labouring for the sake of the people’s joy but for a higher beauty. And so we do not know where this priceless treasure is preserved.

But have you been assured that this treasure is hidden within the boundaries of Italy?—asked one of the listeners. “Of course, already in remote times people were going to other countries. May it not be that these treasures have likewise been unexpectedly dispersed, or rather, preserved in different countries?” Another present added: “It may be this story does not at all refer to a single master. Of course human practices are often repeated. Consequently we find in history continual seeming repetitions of human wanderings and ascents.”

The groom, Goorban, when we reached the middle of the Karakorum Pass, said to me: “Give me a couple of rupees, I will bury them here. Let us too add to the great treasure.”

I asked him: “Then do you think that treasures have been collected together there below?” He looked surprised, even frightened, “But does the Sahib not know? Even to us lowly people it is known that there, deep down, are extensive underground vaults. In them have been gathered treasures from the beginning of the world. There are also great Guardians. Some have been lucky enough to see how from the hidden entry-ways have issued tall white men, who then again withdrew underground. Sometimes they appear with torches and many caravaneers know these fires. These subterranean folk do no evil. They even help people.

“I know for a fact that one local bey lost his caravan in a snow-storm and covered over his head in despair. Then it seemed to him that someone was rummaging around him. He looked round, in the murk, there appeared no horse, no man—he saw nothing. Yet when he put his hand in his pocket, he found a handful of gold pieces. Thus do the great dwellers of the mountains help miserable people in misfortune.”

And again the stories recurred to my mind about the secret magnets established by the followers of the great traveller Appolonius of Tyana. It was said that in definite places where it had been ordained that new states be built up or great cities erected, or where great discoveries and revelations should take place,—on all such sites were implanted portions of a giant meteor, sent from the distant luminaries.

There has even been a custom of testifying to the truth of statements by a reference to
such ordained places. Deponents would say:
"What I have said is as true as the fact that
on a certain site has been placed such and
such."

The groom Goorban again raised the
question: "Why do you foreigners, who know
so much, do not find the entry-way into the
underground kingdom? You know how to do
everything and boast of knowing everything
and yet you do not enter into the secrets
which are guarded by the great fire?"

"Man lives in mysteries,
and these are numberless!"