

CHAPTER XXXI.

In which the Detective forwards Mr. Fogg's Interest considerably.

Phileas Fogg was twenty hours behind time, and Passe-partout, the involuntary cause of the delay, was desperate; he had decidedly ruined his master.

The detective approached Mr. Fogg, and, looking at him attentively, said, "Seriously, sir, are you really in such a hurry?"

"Very seriously I am," replied Fogg.

"It is absolutely necessary, then, for you to be in New York on the 11th--before the departure of the English mail-steamer?"

"I have a very great interest in so doing."

"If, then, your voyage had not been interrupted, you would have reached New York on the morning of the 11th?"

"Yes, with twelve hours to spare."

"Well, you are now twenty hours late. Twelve from twenty leaves

eight--you must regain those eight hours. Do you wish to try?"

"On foot?"

"No, on a sledge," replied Fix; "on a sledge with sails; a man has proposed it to me."

It was, in fact, the man who had spoken to Fix during the night, and whose offer he had refused.

Mr. Fogg did not immediately reply, but Fix pointed out the man, and Fogg went up and spoke to him. Shortly after they entered a hut built just beyond the fort. Here Mr. Fogg was shown a very curious vehicle--a sort of sledge, with room for five or six people. A high mast was firmly supported by wire rigging, and carried a large sail; it was also furnished with a rudder. In fact it was a sledge rigged like a cutter. During the winter, on the frozen plains, the trains cannot run, and these sledges make rapid passages from station to station, and when running before the wind they equal, if they do not exceed, the speed of the train.

The arrangement was soon made. The strong west wind was in their favour. The snow was hard, and Mr. Mudge, the owner, was confident of being able to reach Omaha in a few hours. Thence were plenty of trains to Chicago and New York. It was just possible to recover the lost time, and they did not hesitate to make the attempt.

Mr. Fogg did not wish to expose Aouda to the cold, and suggested that she should remain at the station with Passe-partout, who would escort her to England under more favourable circumstances; but she refused to leave Mr. Fogg, greatly to the delight of Passe-partout, who would not leave his master alone with Fix.

The detective's thoughts would be difficult to guess. Was his conviction shaken by Fogg's return, or did he still regard him as a scoundrel who hoped to be safe in England on his return? Perhaps Fix's opinion concerning Fogg had altered; but he would do his duty, nevertheless; and he would do his duty and hasten his return to England as much as possible.

At eight o'clock the sledge was ready. The passengers took their places, the sails were hoisted, and the vehicle sped over the snow at forty miles an hour. The distance between Fort Kearney and Omaha, as the crow flies, is two hundred miles at most. If the wind held they could reach Omaha by one o'clock, if no accident happened.

What a journey it was! The travellers huddled close together, unable to speak in consequence of the intense cold. The sledge glided over the snow like a boat on a lake, and when the wind rose it was almost lifted off the ground. Mudge steered in a straight line, and counteracted the occasional lurches of the vessel. They hoisted all sail, and certainly could not be going less than forty miles an hour.

"If nothing carries away," said Mudge, "we shall get there in time."

Mr. Mudge had an interest in accomplishing the journey, for Mr. Fogg, as usual, had promised him a handsome reward.

The prairie was as flat as possible, and Mudge steered perfectly straight, taking the chord of the arc described by the railroad, which follows the right bank of the Platte River. Mudge was not afraid of being stopped by the stream, for it was frozen over. So the way was free from all obstacles, and there were but two things to fear--an accident or a change of wind. But the breeze blew steadily in the same direction, and even increased in force. The wire lashing hummed like the chords of a musical instrument, and the sledge sped along accompanied by a plaintive harmony of peculiar intensity.

"Those wires give us the fifth and the octave," said Mr. Fogg.

These were the only words he spoke throughout the passage. Mrs. Aouda was well wrapped up in furs. Passe-partout's face was as red as the setting sun, and, with his usual confidence, began to hope again. Instead of reaching New York in the morning they would get there in the evening, perhaps before the departure of the steamer for Liverpool. Passe-partout had a great desire to clasp Fix by the hand, for he did not forget that it was the detective who had procured the sledge, the only means of reaching Omaha in good time; but some

presentiment induced him to remain quiet. However, Passe-partout would never forget Mr. Fogg's devotion in rescuing him from the Indians.

The sledge still flew along. The plain and the streams were covered with the mantle of snow. A great uninhabited island appeared to be enclosed between the Union and Pacific Railroad and the branch-line which unites Kearney with St. Joseph. Not a house was in sight. They occasionally passed some gaunt tree, and sometimes flocks of wild birds rose about them, or a band of starving wolves pursued the sledge. On these occasions Passe-partout, revolver in hand, was ready to fire on those which came too near. Had an accident happened, the wolves would have made short work of the travellers; but the sledge held on its course, and soon left the howling brutes behind.

At midday Mudge thought they were crossing the Platte River. He said nothing, but he was sure that Omaha was only twenty miles farther on. And in fact in less than an hour their skilful steersman left the helm and hauled down his sails, while the sledge ran on with its acquired impetus. At length it stopped, and Mudge, pointing to a cluster of snow-covered houses, said, "Here we are!"

They had arrived at the desired station, which was in constant communication with the Eastern States. Passe-partout and Fix jumped down and stretched their stiffened limbs. They then assisted Mr. Fogg and Mrs. Aouda to alight. The former paid Mudge handsomely.

Passe-partout shook his hands warmly, and then the whole party rushed

towards the railway-station.

A train was ready to start, and they had only just time to jump in; though they had seen nothing of Omaha, they did not regret it, as they were not travelling for pleasure.

The train rushed across the State of Iowa, past Conneil Bluffs, Des Moines, and Iowa city. During the night they crossed the Mississippi at Davenport and entered Illinois. Next day, the 10th, at four p.m., they reached Chicago, which had risen from its ashes, and, more proudly than ever, was seated on the borders of the beautiful Lake of Michigan.

They were still nine hundred miles from New York, but there were plenty of trains. Mr. Fogg passed at once from one train to another, which started at full-speed as if it knew he had no time to lose. It crossed Indiana, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New Jersey like lightning, through towns with antique names containing streets and tramways, but as yet no houses. At length the Hudson Plain appeared, and at a quarter-past eleven p.m., on the 11th, the train stopped in the station on the right bank of the river, before the very pier from which the Cunard, otherwise known as the British and North American, Royal Mail Steam Packet Company's steamers start.

The China had left for Liverpool three-quarters of an hour previously.