The Adventures of a Special Correspondent

By

Jules Verne

CHAPTER I.

CLAUDIUS BOMBARNAC,
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Such is the address of the telegram I found on the 13th of May when I arrived at Tiflis.

This is what the telegram said:

"As the matters in hand will terminate on the 15th instant Claudius Bombarnac will repair to Uzun Ada, a port on the east coast of the Caspian. There he will take the train by the direct Grand Transasiatic between the European frontier and the capital of the Celestial Empire. He will transmit his impressions in the way of news, interviewing remarkable people on the road, and report the most trivial incidents by letter or telegram as necessity dictates. The Twentieth Century trusts to the zeal, intelligence, activity and tact of its correspondent, who can draw on its bankers to any extent he may deem necessary."

It was the very morning I had arrived at Tiflis with the intention of spending three weeks there in a visit to the Georgian provinces for the

benefit of my newspaper, and also, I hoped, for that of its readers.

Here was the unexpected, indeed; the uncertainty of a special correspondent's life.

At this time the Russian railways had been connected with the line between Poti, Tiflis and Baku. After a long and increasing run through the Southern Russian provinces I had crossed the Caucasus, and imagined I was to have a little rest in the capital of Transcaucasia. And here was the imperious administration of the Twentieth Century giving me only half a day's halt in this town! I had hardly arrived before I was obliged to be off again without unstrapping my portmanteau! But what would you have? We must bow to the exigencies of special correspondence and the modern interview!

But all the same I had been carefully studying this Transcaucasian district, and was well provided with geographic and ethnologic memoranda. Perhaps it may be as well for you to know that the fur cap, in the shape of a turban, which forms the headgear of the mountaineers and cossacks is called a "papakha," that the overcoat gathered in at the waist, over which the cartridge belt is hung, is called a "tcherkeska" by some and "bechmet" by others! Be prepared to assert that the Georgians and Armenians wear a sugar-loaf hat, that the merchants wear a "touloupa," a sort of sheepskin cape, that the Kurd and Parsee still wear the "bourka," a cloak in a material something like plush which is always waterproofed.

And of the headgear of the Georgian ladies, the "tassakravi," composed of a light ribbon, a woolen veil, or piece of muslin round such lovely faces; and their gowns of startling colors, with the wide open sleeves, their under skirts fitted to the figure, their winter cloak of velvet, trimmed with fur and silver gimp, their summer mantle of white cotton, the "tchadre," which they tie tight on the neck--all those fashions in fact so carefully entered in my notebook, what shall I say of them?

Learn, then, that their national orchestras are composed of "zournas," which are shrill flutes; "salamouris," which are squeaky clarinets; mandolines, with copper strings, twanged with a feather; "tchianouris," violins, which are played upright; "dimplipitos," a kind of cymbals which rattle like hail on a window pane.

Know that the "schaska" is a sword hung from a bandolier trimmed with studs and silver embroidery, that the "kindjall" or "kandijar" is a dagger worn in the belt, that the armament of the soldiers of the Caucasus is completed by a long Damascus gun ornamented with bands of chiseled metal.

Know that the "tarantass" is a sort of berline hung on five pieces of rather elastic wood between wheels placed rather wide apart and of moderate height; that this carriage is driven by a "yemtchik," on the front seat, who has three horses, to whom is added a postilion, the "falétre," when it is necessary to hire a fourth horse from the "smatritel," who is the postmaster on the Caucasian roads.

Know, then, that the verst is two-thirds of a mile, that the different nomadic people of the governments of Transcaucasia are composed of Kalmucks, descendants of the Eleuthes, fifteen thousand, Kirghizes of Mussulman origin eight thousand, Koundrof Tartars eleven hundred, Sartof Tartars a hundred and twelve, Nogais eight thousand five hundred, Turkomans nearly four thousand.

And thus, after having so minutely absorbed my Georgia, here was this ukase obliging me to abandon it! And I should not even have time to visit Mount Ararat or publish my impressions of a journey in Transcaucasia, losing a thousand lines of copy at the least, and for which I had at my disposal the 32,000 words of my language actually recognized by the French Academy.

It was hard, but there was no way out of it. And to begin with, at what o'clock did the train for Tiflis start from the Caspian?

The station at Tiflis is the junction of three lines of railway: the western line ending at Poti on the Black Sea, where the passengers land coming from Europe, the eastern line which ends at Baku, where the passengers embark to cross the Caspian, and the line which the Russians have just made for a length of about a hundred miles between Ciscaucasia and Transcaucasia, from Vladikarkaz to Tiflis, crossing the Arkhot range at a height of four thousand five hundred feet, and which connects the Georgian capital with the railways of Southern Russia.

I went to the railway station at a run, and rushed into the departure

office.

"When is there a train for Baku?" I asked.

"You are going to Baku?" answered the clerk.

And from his trap-door he gave me one of those looks more military than civil, which are invariably found under the peak of a Muscovite cap.

"I think so," said I, perhaps a little sharply, "that is, if it is not forbidden to go to Baku."

"No," he replied, dryly, "that is, if you are provided with a proper passport."

"I will have a proper passport," I replied to this ferocious functionary, who, like all the others in Holy Russia, seemed to me an intensified gendarme.

Then I again asked what time the train left for Baku.

"Six o'clock to-night."

"And when does it get there?"

"Seven o'clock in the morning."

"Is that in time to catch the boat for Uzun Ada?"

"In time."

And the man at the trap-door replied to my salute by a salute of mechanical precision.

The question of passport did not trouble me. The French consul would know how to give me all the references required by the Russian administration.

Six o'clock to-night, and it is already nine o'clock in the morning! Bah! When certain guide books tell you how to explore Paris in two days, Rome in three days, and London in four days, it would be rather curious if I could not do Tiflis in a half day. Either one is a correspondent or one is not!

It goes without saying that my newspaper would not have sent me to Russia, if I could not speak fluently in Russian, English and German. To require a newspaper man to know the few thousand languages which are used to express thought in the five parts of the world would be too much; but with the three languages above named, and French added, one can go far across the two continents. It is true, there is Turkish of which I had picked up a few phrases, and there is Chinese of which I did not understand a single word. But I had no fear of remaining dumb in Turkestan and the Celestial Empire. There would be interpreters on the road, and I did not expect to lose a detail of my run on the Grand

Transasiatic. I knew how to see, and see I would. Why should I hide it from myself? I am one of those who think that everything here below can serve as copy for a newspaper man; that the earth, the moon, the sky, the universe were only made as fitting subjects for newspaper articles, and that my pen was in no fear of a holiday on the road.

Before starting off round Tiflis let us have done with this passport business. Fortunately I had no need for a "poderojnaia," which was formerly indispensable to whoever traveled in Russia. That was in the time of the couriers, of the post horses, and thanks to its powers that official exeat cleared away all difficulties, assured the most rapid relays, the most amiable civilities from the postilions, the greatest rapidity of transport, and that to such a pitch that a well-recommended traveler could traverse in eight days five hours the two thousand seven hundred versts which separate Tiflis from Petersburg. But what difficulties there were in procuring that passport!

A mere permission to move about would do for to-day, a certificate attesting in a certain way that you are not a murderer or even a political criminal, that you are what is called an honest man, in a civilized country. Thanks to the assistance I received from our consul at Tiflis, I was soon all in due order with the Muscovite authorities.

It was an affair of two hours and two roubles. I then devoted myself entirely, eyes, ears, legs, to the exploration of the Georgian capital, without taking a guide, for guides are a horror to me. It is true that I should have been capable of guiding no matter what stranger, through

the mazes of this capital which I had so carefully studied beforehand. That is a natural gift.

Here is what I recognized as I wandered about haphazard: first, there was the "douma," which is the town hall, where the "golova," or mayor, resides; if you had done me the honor to accompany me, I would have taken you to the promenade of Krasnoia-Gora on the left bank of the Koura, the Champs Elysées of the place, something like the Tivoli of Copenhagen, or the fair of the Belleville boulevard with its "Katchélis," delightful seesaws, the artfully managed undulations of which will make you seasick. And everywhere amid the confusion of market booths, the women in holiday costume, moving about with faces uncovered, both Georgians and Armenians, thereby showing that they are Christians.

As to the men, they are Apollos of the Belvedere, not so simply clothed, having the air of princes, and I should like to know if they are not so. Are they not descended from them? But I will genealogize later on. Let us continue our exploration at full stride. A minute lost is ten lines of correspondence, and ten lines of correspondence is--that depends on the generosity of the newspaper and its managers.

Quick to the grand caravanserai. There you will find the caravans from all points of the Asiatic continent. Here is one just coming in, composed of Armenian merchants. There is one going out, formed of traders in Persia and Russian Turkestan. I should like to arrive with one and depart with the other. That is not possible, and I am sorry for

it. Since the establishment of the Transasiatic railways, it is not often that you can meet with those interminable and picturesque lines of horsemen, pedestrians, horses, camels, asses, carts. Bah! I have no fear that my journey across Central Asia will fail for want of interest. A special correspondent of the Twentieth Century will know how to make it interesting.

Here now are the bazaars with the thousand products of Persia, China, Turkey, Siberia, Mongolia. There is a profusion of the fabrics of Teheran, Shiraz, Kandahar, Kabul, carpets marvelous in weaving and colors, silks, which are not worth as much as those of Lyons.

Will I buy any? No; to embarrass oneself with packages on a trip from the Caspian to the Celestial Empire, never! The little portmanteau I can carry in my hand, the bag slung across my shoulders, and a traveling suit will be enough for me. Linen? I will get it on the road, in English fashion.

Let us stop in front of the famous baths of Tiflis, the thermal waters of which attain a temperature of 60 degrees centigrade. There you will find in use the highest development of massage, the suppling of the spine, the cracking of the joints. I remember what was said by our great Dumas whose peregrinations were never devoid of incidents; he invented them when he wanted them, that genial precursor of high-pressure correspondence! But I have no time to be shampooed, or to be cracked or suppled.

Stop! The Hôtel de France. Where is there not a Hôtel de France? I enter, I order breakfast--a Georgian breakfast watered with a certain Kachelie wine, which is said to never make you drunk, that is, if you do not sniff up as much as you drink in using the large-necked bottles into which you dip your nose before your lips. At least that is the proceeding dear to the natives of Transcaucasia. As to the Russians, who are generally sober, the infusion of tea is enough for them, not without a certain addition of vodka, which is the Muscovite brandy.

I, a Frenchman, and even a Gascon, am content to drink my bottle of Kachelie, as we drank our Château Laffite, in those regretted days, when the sun still distilled it on the hillsides of Pauillac. In truth this Caucasian wine, although rather sour, accompanied by the boiled fowl, known as pilau--has rather a pleasant taste about it.

It is over and paid for. Let us mingle with the sixteen thousand inhabitants of the Georgian capital. Let us lose ourselves in the labyrinth of its streets, among its cosmopolitan population. Many Jews who button their coats from left to right, as they write--the contrary way to the other Aryan peoples. Perhaps the sons of Israel are not masters in this country, as in so many others? That is so, undoubtedly; a local proverb says it takes six Jews to outwit an Armenian, and Armenians are plentiful in these Transcaucasian provinces.

I reach a sandy square, where camels, with their heads out straight, and their feet bent under in front, are sitting in hundreds. They used to be here in thousands, but since the opening of the Transcaspian

railway some years ago now, the number of these humped beasts of burden has sensibly diminished. Just compare one of these beasts with a goods truck or a luggage van!

Following the slope of the streets, I come out on the quays by the Koura, the bed of which divides the town into two unequal parts. On each side rise the houses, one above the other, each one looking over the roof of its neighbors. In the neighborhood of the river there is a good deal of trade. There you will find much moving about of vendors of wine, with their goatskins bellying out like balloons, and vendors of water with their buffalo skins, fitted with pipes looking like elephants' trunks.

Here am I wandering at a venture; but to wander is human, says the collegians of Bordeaux, as they muse on the quays of the Gironde.

"Sir," says a good little Jew to me, showing me a certain habitation which seems a very ordinary one, "you are a stranger?"

"Quite."

"Then do not pass this house without stopping a moment to admire it."

"And why?"

"There lived the famous tenor Satar, who sang the contre-fa from his chest. And they paid him for it!"

I told the worthy patriarch that I hoped he would be able to sing a contre-sol even better paid for; and I went up the hill to the right of the Koura, so as to have a view of the whole town.

At the top of the hill, on a little open space where a reciter is declaiming with vigorous gestures the verses of Saadi, the adorable Persian poet, I abandon myself to the contemplation of the Transcaucasian capital. What I am doing here, I propose to do again in a fortnight at Pekin. But the pagodas and yamens of the Celestial Empire can wait awhile, here is Tiflis before my eyes; walls of the citadels, belfries of the temples belonging to the different religions, a metropolitan church with its double cross, houses of Russian, Persian, or Armenian construction; a few roofs, but many terraces; a few ornamental frontages, but many balconies and verandas; then two well-marked zones, the lower zone remaining Georgian, the higher zone, more modern, traversed by a long boulevard planted with fine trees, among which is seen the palace of Prince Bariatinsky, a capricious, unexpected marvel of irregularity, which the horizon borders with its grand frontier of mountains.

It is now five o'clock. I have no time to deliver myself in a remunerative torrent of descriptive phrases. Let us hurry off to the railway station.

There is a crowd of Armenians, Georgians, Mingrelians, Tartars, Kurds, Israelites, Russians, from the shores of the Caspian, some taking their

tickets--Oh! the Oriental color--direct for Baku, some for intermediate stations.

This time I was completely in order. Neither the clerk with the gendarme's face, nor the gendarmes themselves could hinder my departure.

I take a ticket for Baku, first class. I go down on the platform to the carriages. According to my custom, I install myself in a comfortable corner. A few travelers follow me while the cosmopolitan populace invade the second and third-class carriages. The doors are shut after the visit of the ticket inspector. A last scream of the whistle announces that the train is about to start.

Suddenly there is a shout--a shout in which anger is mingled with despair, and I catch these words in German:

"Stop! Stop!"

I put down the window and look out.

A fat man, bag in hand, traveling cap on head, his legs embarrassed in the skirts of a huge overcoat, short and breathless. He is late.

The porters try to stop him. Try to stop a bomb in the middle of its trajectory! Once again has right to give place to might.

The Teuton bomb describes a well-calculated curve, and has just fallen

into the compartment next to ours, through the door a traveler had obligingly left open.

The train begins to move at the same instant, the engine wheels begin to slip on the rails, then the speed increases.

We are off.