

CHAPTER II.

We were three minutes late in starting; it is well to be precise. A special correspondent who is not precise is a geometer who neglects to run out his calculations to the tenth decimal. This delay of three minutes made the German our traveling companion. I have an idea that this good man will furnish me with some copy, but it is only a presentiment.

It is still daylight at six o'clock in the evening in this latitude. I have bought a time-table and I consult it. The map which accompanies it shows me station by station the course of the line between Tiflis and Baku. Not to know the direction taken by the engine, to be ignorant if the train is going northeast or southeast, would be insupportable to me, all the more as when night comes, I shall see nothing, for I cannot see in the dark as if I were an owl or a cat.

My time-table shows me that the railway skirts for a little distance the carriage road between Tiflis and the Caspian, running through Saganlong, Poily, Elisabethpol, Karascal, Aliat, to Baku, along the valley of the Koura. We cannot tolerate a railway which winds about; it must keep to a straight line as much as possible. And that is what the Transgeorgian does.

Among the stations there is one I would have gladly stopped at if I had

had time, Elisabethpol. Before I received the telegram from the Twentieth Century, I had intended to stay there a week. I had read such attractive descriptions of it, and I had but a five minutes' stop there, and that between two and three o'clock in the morning! Instead of a town resplendent in the rays of the sun, I could only obtain a view of a vague mass confusedly discoverable in the pale beams of the moon!

Having ended my careful examination of the time-table, I began to examine my traveling companions. There were four of us, and I need scarcely say that we occupied the four corners of the compartment. I had taken the farthest corner facing the engine. At the two opposite angles two travelers were seated facing each other. As soon as they got in they had pulled their caps down on their eyes and wrapped themselves up in their cloaks--evidently they were Georgians as far as I could see. But they belonged to that special and privileged race who sleep on the railway, and they did not wake up until we reached Baku. There was nothing to be got out of those people; the carriage is not a carriage for them, it is a bed.

In front of me was quite a different type with nothing of the Oriental about it; thirty-two to thirty-five years old, face with a reddish beard, very much alive in look, nose like that of a dog standing at point, mouth only too glad to talk, hands free and easy, ready for a shake with anybody; a tall, vigorous, broad-shouldered, powerful man. By the way in which he settled himself and put down his bag, and unrolled his traveling rug of bright-hued tartan, I had recognized the

Anglo-Saxon traveler, more accustomed to long journeys by land and sea than to the comforts of his home, if he had a home. He looked like a commercial traveler. I noticed that his jewelry was in profusion; rings on his fingers, pin in his scarf, studs on his cuffs, with photographic views in them, showy trinkets hanging from the watch-chain across his waistcoat. Although he had no earrings and did not wear a ring at his nose I should not have been surprised if he turned out to be an American--probably a Yankee.

That is my business. To find out who are my traveling companions, whence they come, where they go, is that not the duty of a special correspondent in search of interviews? I will begin with my neighbor in front of me. That will not be difficult, I imagine. He is not dreaming or sleeping, or looking out on the landscape lighted by the last rays of the sun. If I am not mistaken he will be just as glad to speak to me as I am to speak to him--and reciprocally.

I will see. But a fear restrains me. Suppose this American--and I am sure he is one--should also be a special, perhaps for the World or the New York Herald, and suppose he has also been ordered off to do this Grand Asiatic. That would be most annoying! He would be a rival!

My hesitation is prolonged. Shall I speak, shall I not speak? Already night has begun to fall. At last I was about to open my mouth when my companion prevented me.

"You are a Frenchman?" he said in my native tongue.

"Yes, sir," I replied in his.

Evidently we could understand each other.

The ice was broken, and then question followed on question rather rapidly between us. You know the Oriental proverb:

"A fool asks more questions in an hour than a wise man in a year."

But as neither my companion nor myself had any pretensions to wisdom we asked away merrily.

"Wait a bit," said my American.

I italicize this phrase because it will recur frequently, like the pull of the rope which gives the impetus to the swing.

"Wait a bit! I'll lay ten to one that you are a reporter!"

"And you would win! Yes. I am a reporter sent by the Twentieth Century to do this journey."

"Going all the way to Peking?"

"To Peking."

"So am I," replied the Yankee.

And that was what I was afraid of.

"Same trade?" said I indifferently.

"No. You need not excite yourself. We don't sell the same stuff, sir."

"Claudius Bombarnac, of Bordeaux, is delighted to be on the same road as--"

"Fulk Ephrinell, of the firm of Strong, Bulbul & Co., of New York City, New York, U.S.A."

And he really added U.S.A.

We were mutually introduced. I a traveler in news, and he a traveler in--In what? That I had to find out.

The conversation continues. Ephrinell, as may be supposed, has been everywhere--and even farther, as he observes. He knows both Americas and almost all Europe. But this is the first time he has set foot in Asia. He talks and talks, and always jerks in Wait a bit, with inexhaustible loquacity. Has the Hunson the same properties as the Garonne?

I listen to him for two hours. I have hardly heard the names of the

stations yelled out at each stop, Saganlong, Poily, and the others. And I really should have liked to examine the landscape in the soft light of the moon, and made a few notes on the road.

Fortunately my fellow traveler had already crossed these eastern parts of Georgia. He pointed out the spots of interest, the villages, the watercourses, the mountains on the horizon. But I hardly saw them. Confound these railways! You start, you arrive, and you have seen nothing on the road!

"No!" I exclaim, "there is none of the charm about it as there is in traveling by post, in troika, tarantass, with the surprises of the road, the originality of the inns, the confusion when you change horses, the glass of vodka of the yemtchiks--and occasionally the meeting with those honest brigands whose race is nearly extinct."

"Mr. Bombarnac," said Ephrinell to me, "are you serious in regretting all those fine things?"

"Quite serious," I reply. "With the advantages of the straight line of railway we lose the picturesqueness of the curved line, or the broken line of the highways of the past. And, Monsieur Ephrinell, when you read of traveling in Transcaucasia forty years ago, do you not regret it? Shall I see one of those villages inhabited by Cossacks who are soldiers and farmers at one and the same time? Shall I be present at one of those merry-makings which charm the tourist? those djiquitovkas with the men upright on their horses, throwing their swords,

discharging their pistols, and escorting you if you are in the company of some high functionary, or a colonel of the Staniza."

"Undoubtedly we have lost all those fine things," replies my Yankee.

"But, thanks to these iron ribbons which will eventually encircle our globe like a hogshead of cider or a bale of cotton, we can go in thirteen days from Tiflis to Peking. That is why, if you expect any incidents, to enliven you--"

"Certainly, Monsieur Ephrinell."

"Illusions, Mr. Bombarnac! Nothing will happen either to you or me.

Wait a bit, I promise you a journey, the most prosaic, the most homely, the flattest--flat as the steppes of Kara Koum, which the Grand Transasiatic traverses in Turkestan, and the plains of the desert of Gobi it crosses in China--"

"Well, we shall see, for I travel for the pleasure of my readers."

"And I travel merely for my own business."

And at this reply the idea recurred to me that Ephrinell would not be quite the traveling companion I had dreamed of. He had goods to sell, I had none to buy. I foresaw that our meeting would not lead to a sufficient intimacy during our long journey. He was one of those Yankees who, as they say, hold a dollar between their teeth, which it is impossible to get away from them, and I should get nothing out of

him that was worth having.

And although I knew that he traveled for Strong, Bulbul & Co., of New York, I had never heard of the firm. To listen to their representative, it would appear that Strong, Bulbul & Co. ought to be known throughout the world.

But then, how was it that they were unknown to me, a pupil of Chincholle, our master in everything! I was quite at a loss because I had never heard of the firm of Strong, Bulbul & Co.

I was about to interrogate Ephrinell on this point, when he said to me:

"Have you ever been in the United States, Mr. Bombarnac?"

"No, Monsieur Ephrinell."

"You will come to our country some day?"

"Perhaps."

"Then you will not forget to explore the establishment of Strong, Bulbul & Co.?"

"Explore it?"

"That is the proper word."

"Good! I shall not fail to do so."

"You will see one of the most remarkable industrial establishments of the New Continent."

"I have no doubt of it; but how am I to know it?"

"Wait a bit, Mr. Bombarnac. Imagine a colossal workshop, immense buildings for the mounting and adjusting of the pieces, a steam engine of fifteen hundred horse-power, ventilators making six hundred revolutions a minute, boilers consuming a hundred tons of coals a day, a chimney stack four hundred and fifty feet high, vast outhouses for the storage of our goods, which we send to the five parts of the world, a general manager, two sub-managers, four secretaries, eight under-secretaries, a staff of five hundred clerks and nine hundred workmen, a whole regiment of travelers like your servant, working in Europe, Asia, Africa, America, Australasia, in short, a turnover exceeding annually one hundred million dollars! And all that, Mr. Bombarnac, for making millions of--yes, I said millions--"

At this moment the train commenced to slow under the action of its automatic brakes, and he stopped.

"Elisabethpol! Elisabethpol!" shout the guard and the porters on the station.

Our conversation is interrupted. I lower the window on my side, and open the door, being desirous of stretching my legs.

Ephrinell did not get out.

Here was I striding along the platform of a very poorly lighted station. A dozen travelers had already left the train. Five or six Georgians were crowding on the steps of the compartments. Ten minutes at Elisabethpol; the time-table allowed us no more.

As soon as the bell begins to ring I return to our carriage, and when I have shut the door I notice that my place is taken. Yes! Facing the American, a lady has installed herself with that Anglo-Saxon coolness which is as unlimited as the infinite. Is she young? Is she old? Is she pretty? Is she plain? The obscurity does not allow me to judge. In any case, my French gallantry prevents me from claiming my corner, and I sit down beside this person who makes no attempt at apology.

Ephrinell seems to be asleep, and that stops my knowing what it is that Strong, Bulbul & Co., of New York, manufacture by the million.

The train has started. We have left Elisabethpol behind. What have I seen of this charming town of twenty thousand inhabitants, built on the Gandja-tchaï, a tributary of the Koura, which I had specially worked up before my arrival? Nothing of its brick houses hidden under verdure, nothing of its curious ruins, nothing of its superb mosque built at the beginning of the eighteenth century. Of its admirable plane trees, so

sought after by crows and blackbirds, and which maintain a supportable temperature during the excessive heats of summer, I had scarcely seen the higher branches with the moon shining on them. And on the banks of the stream which bears its silvery murmuring waters along the principal street, I had only seen a few houses in little gardens, like small crenelated fortresses. All that remained in my memory would be an indecisive outline, seized in flight from between the steam puffs of our engine. And why are these houses always in a state of defence? Because Elisabethpol is a fortified town exposed to the frequent attacks of the Lesghians of Chirvan, and these mountaineers, according to the best-informed historians, are directly descended from Attila's hordes.

It was nearly midnight. Weariness invited me to sleep, and yet, like a good reporter, I must sleep with one eye and one ear open.

I fall into that sort of slumber provoked by the regular trepidations of a train on the road, mingled with ear-splitting whistles and the grind of the brakes as the speed is slowed, and tumultuous roars as passing trains are met with, besides the names of the stations shouted out during the short stoppages, and the banging of the doors which are opened or shut with metallic sonority.

In this way I heard the shouts of Geran, Varvara, Oudjarry, Kiourdamir, Klourdane, then Karasoul, Navagi. I sat up, but as I no longer occupied the corner from which I had been so cavalierly evicted, it was impossible for me to look through the window.

And then I began to ask what is hidden beneath this mass of veils and wraps and petticoats, which has usurped my place. Is this lady going to be my companion all the way to the terminus of the Grand Transasiatic? Shall I exchange a sympathetic salute with her in the streets of Pekin? And from her my thoughts wander to my companion who is snoring in the corner in a way that would make all the ventilators of Strong, Bulbul & Co. quite jealous. And what is it these big people make? Is it iron bridges, or locomotives, or armor plates, or steam boilers, or mining pumps? From what my American told me, I might find a rival to Creusot or Cokerill or Essen in this formidable establishment in the United States of America. At least unless he has been taking a rise out of me, for he does not seem to be "green," as they say in his country, which means to say that he does not look very much like an idiot, this Ephrinell!

And yet it seems that I must gradually have fallen sound asleep. Withdrawn from exterior influences, I did not even hear the stentorian respiration of the Yankee. The train arrived at Aliat, and stayed there ten minutes without my being aware of it. I am sorry for it, for Aliat is a little seaport, and I should like to have had a first glimpse of the Caspian, and of the countries ravaged by Peter the Great. Two columns of the historico-fantastic might have been made out of that, with the aid of Bouillet and Larousse.

"Baku! Baku!"

The word repeated as the train stopped awoke me.

It was seven o'clock in the morning.