

### CHAPTER III.

The boat did not start until three o'clock in the afternoon. Those of my companions who intended to cross the Caspian hurried off to the harbor; it being necessary to engage a cabin, or to mark one's place in the steamer's saloon.

Ephrinell precipitately left me with these words:

"I have not an instant to lose. I must see about the transport of my baggage."

"Have you much?"

"Forty-two cases."

"Forty-two cases!" I exclaimed.

"And I am sorry I have not double as many. Allow me--"

If he had had a voyage of eight days, instead of one of twenty-four hours, and had to cross the Atlantic instead of the Caspian, he could not have been in a greater hurry.

As you may imagine, the Yankee did not for a moment think of offering

his hand to assist our companion in descending from the carriage. I took his place. The lady leaned on my arm and jumped--no, gently put her foot on the ground. My reward was a thank you, sir, uttered in a hard, dry, unmistakably British voice.

Thackeray has said somewhere that a well-brought-up Englishwoman is the completest of the works of God on this earth. My only wish is to verify this gallant affirmation in the case of my companion. She has put back her veil. Is she a young woman or an old girl? With these Englishwomen one never knows! Twenty-five years is apparently about her age, she has an Albionesque complexion, a jerky walk, a high dress like an equinoctial tide, no spectacles, although she has eyes of the intense blue which are generally short-sighted. While I bend my back as I bow, she honors me with a nod, which only brings into play the vertebrae of her long neck, and she walks off straight toward the way out.

Probably I shall meet this person again on the steamboat. For my part, I shall not go down to the harbor until it is time to start. I am at Baku: I have half a day to see Baku, and I shall not lose an hour, now that the chances of my wanderings have brought me to Baku.

It is possible that the name may in no way excite the reader's curiosity. But perhaps it may inflame his imagination if I tell him that Baku is the town of the Guebres, the city of the Parsees, the metropolis of the fire-worshippers.

Encircled by a triple girdle of black battlemented walls, the town is

built near Cape Apcheron, on the extreme spur of the Caucasian range. But am I in Persia or in Russia? In Russia undoubtedly, for Georgia is a Russian province; but we can still believe we are in Persia, for Baku has retained its Persian physiognomy. I visit a palace of the khans, a pure product of the architecture of the time of Schahriar and Scheherazade, "daughter of the moon," his gifted romancer, a palace in which the delicate sculpture is as fresh as it came from the chisel. Further on rise some slender minarets, and not the bulbous roofs of Moscow the Holy, at the angles of an old mosque, into which one can enter without taking off one's boots. True, the muezzin no longer declaims from it some sonorous verse of the Koran at the hour of prayer. And yet Baku has portions of it which are real Russian in manners and aspect, with their wooden houses without a trace of Oriental color, a railway station of imposing aspect, worthy of a great city in Europe or America, and at the end of one of the roads, a modern harbor, the atmosphere of which is foul with the coal smoke vomited from the steamer funnels.

And, in truth, one asks what they are doing with coal in this town of naphtha. What is the good of coal when the bare and arid soil of Apcheron, which grows only the Pontic absinthium, is so rich in mineral oil? At eighty francs the hundred kilos, it yields naphtha, black or white, which the exigencies of supply will not exhaust for centuries.

A marvelous phenomenon indeed! Do you want a light or a fire? Nothing can be simpler; make a hole in the ground, the gas escapes, and you apply a match. That is a natural gasometer within the reach of all

purses.

I should have liked to visit the famous sanctuary of Atesh Gah; but it is twenty-two versts from the town, and time failed me. There burns the eternal fire, kept up for centuries by the Parsee priests from India, who never touch animal food.

This reminds me that I have not yet breakfasted, and as eleven o'clock strikes, I make my way to the restaurant at the railway, where I have no intention of conforming myself to the alimentary code of the Parsees of Atesh Gah.

As I am entering, Ephrinell rushes out.

"Breakfast?" say I.

"I have had it," he replies.

"And your cases?"

"I have still twenty-nine to get down to the steamer. But, pardon, I have not a moment to lose. When a man represents the firm of Strong, Bulbul & Co., who send out every week five thousand cases of their goods--"

"Go, go, Monsieur Ephrinell, we will meet on board. By the by, you have not met our traveling companion?"

"What traveling companion?"

"The young lady who took my place in the carriage."

"Was there a young lady with us?"

"Of course."

"Well you are the first to tell me so, Mr. Bombarnac. You are the first to tell me so."

And thereupon the American goes out of the door and disappears. It is to be hoped I shall know before we get to Peking what it is that Strong, Bulbul & Co. send out in such quantities. Five thousand cases a week--what an output, and what a turnover!

I had soon finished my breakfast and was off again. During my walk I was able to admire a few magnificent Lesghians; these wore the grayish tcherkesse, with the cartridge belts on the chest, the bechmet of bright red silk, the gaiters embroidered with silver, the boots flat, without a heel, the white papak on the head, the long gun on the shoulders, the schaska and kandijar at the belt--in short men of the arsenal as there are men of the orchestra, but of superb aspect and who ought to have a marvelous effect in the processions of the Russian emperor.

It is already two o'clock, and I think I had better get down to the boat. I must call at the railway station, where I have left my light luggage at the cloakroom.

Soon I am off again, bag in one hand, stick in the other, hastening down one of the roads leading to the harbor.

At the break in the wall where access is obtained to the quay, my attention is, I do not know why, attracted by two people walking along together. The man is from thirty to thirty-five years old, the woman from twenty-five to thirty, the man already a grayish brown, with mobile face, lively look, easy walk with a certain swinging of the hips. The woman still a pretty blonde, blue eyes, a rather fresh complexion, her hair frizzed under a cap, a traveling costume which is in good taste neither in its unfashionable cut nor in its glaring color. Evidently a married couple come in the train from Tiflis, and unless I am mistaken they are French.

But although I look at them with curiosity, they take no notice of me. They are too much occupied to see me. In their hands, on their shoulders, they have bags and cushions and wraps and sticks and sunshades and umbrellas. They are carrying every kind of little package you can think of which they do not care to put with the luggage on the steamer. I have a good mind to go and help them. Is it not a happy chance--and a rare one--to meet with French people away from France?

Just as I am walking up to them, Ephrinell appears, drags me away, and

I leave the couple behind. It is only a postponement. I will meet them again on the steamboat and make their acquaintance on the voyage.

"Well," said I to the Yankee, "how are you getting on with your cargo?"

"At this moment, sir, the thirty-seventh case is on the road."

"And no accident up to now?"

"No accident."

"And what may be in those cases, if you please?"

"In those cases? Ah! There is the thirty-seventh!" he exclaimed, and he ran out to meet a truck which had just come onto the quay.

There was a good deal of bustle about, and all the animation of departures and arrivals. Baku is the most frequented and the safest port on the Caspian. Derbent, situated more to the north, cannot keep up with it, and it absorbs almost the entire maritime traffic of this sea, or rather this great lake which has no communication with the neighboring seas. The establishment of Uzun Ada on the opposite coast has doubled the trade which used to pass through Baku. The Transcaspian now open for passengers and goods is the chief commercial route between Europe and Turkestan.

In the near future there will perhaps be a second route along the

Persian frontier connecting the South Russian railways with those of British India, and that will save travelers the navigation of the Caspian. And when this vast basin has dried up through evaporation, why should not a railroad be run across its sandy bed, so that trains can run through without transshipment at Baku and Uzun Ada?

While we are waiting for the realization of this desideratum, it is necessary to take the steamboat, and that I am preparing to do in company with many others.

Our steamer is called the *Astara*, of the Caucasus and Mercury Company. She is a big paddle steamer, making three trips a week from coast to coast. She is a very roomy boat, designed to carry a large cargo, and the builders have thought considerably more of the cargo than of the passengers. After all, there is not much to make a fuss about in a day's voyage.

There is a noisy crowd on the quay of people who are going off, and people who have come to see them off, recruited from the cosmopolitan population of Baku. I notice that the travelers are mostly Turkomans, with about a score of Europeans of different nationalities, a few Persians, and two representatives of the Celestial Empire. Evidently their destination is China. .

The *Astara* is loaded up. The hold is not big enough, and a good deal of the cargo has overflowed onto the deck. The stern is reserved for passengers, but from the bridge forward to the topgallant forecastle,



there is a heap of cases covered with tarpaulins to protect them from the sea.

There Ephrinell's cases have been put. He has lent a hand with Yankee energy, determined not to lose sight of his valuable property, which is in cubical cases, about two feet on the side, covered with patent leather, carefully strapped, and on which can be read the stenciled words, "Strong, Bulbul & Co., Now York."

"Are all your goods on board?" I asked the American.

"There is the forty-second case just coming," he replied.

And there was the said case on the back of a porter already coming along the gangway.

It seemed to me that the porter was rather tottery, owing perhaps to a lengthy absorption of vodka.

"Wait a bit!" shouted Ephrinell. Then in good Russian, so as to be better understood, he shouted:

"Look out! Look out!"

It is good advice, but it is too late. The porter has just made a false step. The case slips from his shoulders, falls--luckily over the rail of the Astara--breaks in two, and a quantity of little packets of

paper scatter their contents on the deck.

What a shout of indignation did Ephrinell raise! What a whack with his fist did he administer to the unfortunate porter as he repeated in a voice of despair: "My teeth, my poor teeth!"

And he went down on his knees to gather up his little bits of artificial ivory that were scattered all about, while I could hardly keep from laughing.

Yes! It was teeth which Strong, Bulbul & Co., of New York made! It was for manufacturing five thousand cases a week for the five parts of the world that this huge concern existed! It was for supplying the dentists of the old and new worlds; it was for sending teeth as far as China, that their factory required fifteen hundred horse power, and burned a hundred tons of coal a day! That is quite American!

After all, the population of the globe is fourteen hundred million, and as there are thirty-two teeth per inhabitant, that makes forty-five thousand millions; so that if it ever became necessary to replace all the true teeth by false ones, the firm of Strong, Bulbul & Co. would not be able to supply them.

But we must leave Ephrinell gathering up the odontological treasures of the forty-second case. The bell is ringing for the last time. All the passengers are aboard. The Astara is casting off her warps.

Suddenly there are shouts from the quay. I recognize them as being in German, the same as I had heard at Tiflis when the train was starting for Baku.

It is the same man. He is panting, he runs, he cannot run much farther. The gangway has been drawn ashore, and the steamer is already moving off. How will this late comer get on board?

Luckily there is a rope out astern which still keeps the Astara near the quay. The German appears just as two sailors are manoeuvring with the fender. They each give him a hand and help him on board.

Evidently this fat man is an old hand at this sort of thing, and I should not be surprised if he did not arrive at his destination.

However, the Astara is under way, her powerful paddles are at work, and we are soon out of the harbor.

About a quarter of a mile out there is a sort of boiling, agitating the surface of the sea, and showing some deep trouble in the waters. I was then near the rail on the starboard quarter, and, smoking my cigar, was looking at the harbor disappearing behind the point round Cape Apcheron, while the range of the Caucasus ran up into the western horizon.

Of my cigar there remained only the end between my lips, and taking a last whiff, I threw it overboard.

In an instant a sheet of flame burst out all round the steamer The boiling came from a submarine spring of naphtha, and the cigar end had set it alight.

Screams arise. The Astara rolls amid sheaves of flame; but a movement of the helm steers us away from the flaming spring, and we are out of danger.

The captain comes aft and says to me in a frigid tone:

"That was a foolish thing to do."

And I reply, as I usually reply under such circumstances:

"Really, captain, I did not know--"

"You ought always to know, sir!"

These words are uttered in a dry, cantankerous tone a few feet away from me.

I turn to see who it is.

It is the Englishwoman who has read me this little lesson.