

CHAPTER IV.

I am always suspicious of a traveler's "impressions." These impressions are subjective--a word I use because it is the fashion, although I am not quite sure what it means. A cheerful man looks at things cheerfully, a sorrowful man looks at them sorrowfully. Democritus would have found something enchanting about the banks of the Jordan and the shores of the Dead Sea. Heraclitus would have found something disagreeable about the Bay of Naples and the beach of the Bosphorus. I am of a happy nature--you must really pardon me if I am rather egotistic in this history, for it is so seldom that an author's personality is so mixed up with what he is writing about--like Hugo, Dumas, Lamartine, and so many others. Shakespeare is an exception, and I am not Shakespeare--and, as far as that goes, I am not Lamartine, nor Dumas, nor Hugo.

However, opposed as I am to the doctrines of Schopenhauer and Leopardi, I will admit that the shores of the Caspian did seem rather gloomy and dispiriting. There seemed to be nothing alive on the coast; no vegetation, no birds. There was nothing to make you think you were on a great sea. True, the Caspian is only a lake about eighty feet below the level of the Mediterranean, but this lake is often troubled by violent storms. A ship cannot "get away," as sailors say: it is only about a hundred leagues wide. The coast is quickly reached eastward or

westward, and harbors of refuge are not numerous on either the Asiatic or the European side.

There are a hundred passengers on board the Astará--a large number of them Caucasians trading with Turkestan, and who will be with us all the way to the eastern provinces of the Celestial Empire.

For some years now the Transcaspian has been running between Uzun Ada and the Chinese frontier. Even between this part and Samarkand it has no less than sixty-three stations; and it is in this section of the line that most of the passengers will alight. I need not worry about them, and I will lose no time in studying them. Suppose one of them proves interesting, I may pump him and peg away at him, and just at the critical moment he will get out.

No! All my attention I must devote to those who are going through with me. I have already secured Ephrinell, and perhaps that charming Englishwoman, who seems to me to be going to Peking. I shall meet with other traveling companions at Uzun Ada. With regard to the French couple, there is nothing more at present, but the passage of the Caspian will not be accomplished before I know something about them. There are also these two Chinamen who are evidently going to China. If I only knew a hundred words of the "Kouan-hoa," which is the language spoken in the Celestial Empire, I might perhaps make something out of these curious guys. What I really want is some personage with a story, some mysterious hero traveling incognito, a lord or a bandit. I must not forget my trade as a reporter of occurrences and an interviewer of

mankind--at so much a line and well selected. He who makes a good choice has a good chance.

I go down the stairs to the saloon aft. There is not a place vacant. The cabins are already occupied by the passengers who are afraid of the pitching and rolling. They went to bed as soon as they came on board, and they will not get up until the boat is alongside the wharf at Uzun Ada. The cabins being full, other travelers have installed themselves on the couches, amid a lot of little packages, and they will not move from there.

As I am going to pass the night on deck, I return up the cabin stairs. The American is there, just finishing the repacking of his case.

"Would you believe it!" he exclaims, "that that drunken moujik actually asked me for something to drink?"

"I hope you have lost nothing, Monsieur Ephrinell?" I reply.

"No; fortunately."

"May I ask how many teeth you are importing into China in those cases?"

"Eighteen hundred thousand, without counting the wisdom teeth!"

And Ephrinell began to laugh at this little joke, which he fired off on several other occasions during the voyage. I left him and went onto the

bridge between the paddle boxes.

It is a beautiful night, with the northerly wind beginning to freshen. In the offing, long, greenish streaks are sweeping over the surface of the sea. It is possible that the night may be rougher than we expect. In the forepart of the steamer are many passengers, Turkomans in rags, Kirghizes wrapped up to the eyes, moujiks in emigrant costume--poor fellows, in fact, stretched on the spare spars, against the sides, and along the tarpaulins. They are almost all smoking or nibbling at the provisions they have brought for the voyage. The others are trying to sleep and forget their fatigue, and perhaps their hunger.

It occurs to me to take a stroll among these groups. I am like a hunter beating the brushwood before getting into the hiding place. And I go among this heap of packages, looking them over as if I were a custom house officer.

A rather large deal case, covered with a tarpaulin, attracts my attention. It measures about a yard and a half in height, and a yard in width and depth. It has been placed here with the care required by these words in Russian, written on the side, "Glass--Fragile--Keep from damp," and then directions, "Top--Bottom," which have been respected. And then there is the address, "Mademoiselle Zinca Klorck, Avenue Cha-Coua, Pekin, Petchili, China."

This Zinca Klorck--her name showed it--ought to be a Roumanian, and she was taking advantage of this through train on the Grand Transasiatic to

get her glass forwarded. Was this an article in request at the shops of the Middle Kingdom? How otherwise could the fair Celestials admire their almond eyes and their elaborate hair?

The bell rang and announced the six-o'clock dinner. The dining-room is forward. I went down to it, and found it already occupied by some forty people.

Ephrinell had installed himself nearly in the middle. There was a vacant seat near him; he beckoned to me to occupy it, and I hastened to take possession.

Was it by chance? I know not; but the Englishwoman was seated on Ephrinell's left and talking to him. He introduced me.

"Miss Horatia Bluett," he said.

Opposite I saw the French couple conscientiously studying the bill of fare.

At the other end of the table, close to where the food came from--and where the people got served first--was the German passenger, a man strongly built and with a ruddy face, fair hair, reddish beard, clumsy hands, and a very long nose which reminded one of the proboscidean feature of the plantigrades. He had that peculiar look of the officers of the Landsturm threatened with premature obesity.

"He is not late this time," said I to Ephrinell.

"The dinner hour is never forgotten in the German Empire!" replied the American.

"Do you know that German's name?"

"Baron Weisschnitzerdörfer."

"And with that name is he going to Peking?"

"To Peking, like that Russian major who is sitting near the captain of the Astara."

I looked at the man indicated. He was about fifty years of age, of true Muscovite type, beard and hair turning gray, face prepossessing. I knew Russian: he ought to know French. Perhaps he was the fellow traveler of whom I had dreamed.

"You said he was a major, Mr. Ephrinell?"

"Yes, a doctor in the Russian army, and they call him Major Noltitz."

Evidently the American was some distance ahead of me, and yet he was not a reporter by profession.

As the rolling was not yet very great, we could dine in comfort.

Ephrinell chatted with Miss Horatia Bluett, and I understood that there was an understanding between these two perfectly Anglo-Saxon natures.

In fact, one was a traveler in teeth and the other was a traveler in hair. Miss Horatia Bluett represented an important firm in London, Messrs. Holmes-Holme, to whom the Celestial Empire annually exports two millions of female heads of hair. She was going to Peking on account of the said firm, to open an office as a center for the collection of the Chinese hair crop. It seemed a promising enterprise, as the secret society of the Blue Lotus was agitating for the abolition of the pigtail, which is the emblem of the servitude of the Chinese to the Manchu Tartars. "Come," thought I, "if China sends her hair to England, America sends her teeth: that is a capital exchange, and everything is for the best."

We had been at the table for a quarter of an hour, and nothing had happened. The traveler with the smooth complexion and his blonde companion seemed to listen to us when we spoke in French. It evidently pleased them, and they were already showing an inclination to join in our talk. I was not mistaken, then; they are compatriots, but of what class?

At this moment the *Astara* gave a lurch. The plates rattled on the table; the covers slipped; the glasses upset some of their contents; the hanging lamps swung out of the vertical--or rather our seats and the table moved in accordance with the roll of the ship. It is a curious effect, when one is sailor enough to bear it without alarm.

"Eh!" said the American; "here is the good old Caspian shaking her skin."

"Are you subject to seasickness?" I asked.

"No more than a porpoise," said he. "Are you ever seasick?" he continued to his neighbor.

"Never," said Miss Horatia Bluett.

On the other side of the table there was an interchange of a few words in French.

"You are not unwell, Madame Caterna?"

"No, Adolphe, not yet; but if this continues, I am afraid--"

"Well, Caroline, we had better go on deck. The wind has hauled a point to the eastward, and the Astara will soon be sticking her nose in the feathers."

His way of expressing himself shows that "Monsieur Caterna"--if that was his name--was a sailor, or ought to have been one. That explains the way he rolls his hips as he walks.

The pitching now becomes very violent. The majority of the company

cannot stand it. About thirty of the passengers have left the table for the deck. I hope the fresh air will do them good. We are now only a dozen in the dining room, including the captain, with whom Major Noltitz is quietly conversing. Ephrinnell and Miss Bluett seem to be thoroughly accustomed to these inevitable incidents of navigation. The German baron drinks and eats as if he had taken up his quarters in some bier-halle at Munich, or Frankfort, holding his knife in his right hand, his fork in his left, and making up little heaps of meat, which he salts and peppers and covers with sauce, and then inserts under his hairy lip on the point of his knife. Fie! What behavior! And yet he gets on splendidly, and neither rolling nor pitching makes him lose a mouthful of food or drink.

A little way off are the two Celestials, whom I watch with curiosity.

One is a young man of distinguished bearing, about twenty-five years old, of pleasant physiognomy, in spite of his yellow skin and his narrow eyes. A few years spent in Europe have evidently Europeanized his manners and even his dress. His mustache is silky, his eye is intelligent his hair is much more French than Chinese. He seems to me a nice fellow, of a cheerful temperament, who would not ascend the "Tower of Regret," as the Chinese have it, oftener than he could help.

His companion, on the contrary, whom he always appears to be making fun of, is of the type of the true porcelain doll, with the moving head; he is from fifty to fifty-five years old, like a monkey in the face, the top of his head half shaven, the pigtail down his back, the traditional

costume, frock, vest, belt, baggy trousers, many-colored slippers; a China vase of the Green family. He, however, could hold out no longer, and after a tremendous pitch, accompanied by a long rattle of the crockery, he got up and hurried on deck. And as he did so, the younger Chinaman shouted after him, "Cornaro! Cornaro!" at the same time holding out a little volume he had left on the table.

What was the meaning of this Italian word in an Oriental mouth? Did the Chinaman speak the language of Boccaccio? The Twentieth Century ought to know, and it would know.

Madame Caterna arose, very pale, and Monsieur Caterna, a model husband, followed her on deck.

The dinner over, leaving Ephrinell and Miss Bluett to talk of brokerages and prices current, I went for a stroll on the poop of the Astarta. Night had nearly closed in. The hurrying clouds, driven from the eastward, draped in deep folds the higher zones of the sky, with here and there a few stars peeping through. The wind was rising. The white light of the steamer clicked as it swung on the foremast. The red and green lights rolled with the ship, and projected their long colored rays onto the troubled waters.

I met Ephrinell, Miss Horatia Bluett having retired to her cabin; he was going down into the saloon to find a comfortable corner on one of the couches. I wished him good night, and he left me after gratifying me with a similar wish.

As for me, I will wrap myself in my rug and lie down in a corner of the deck, and sleep like a sailor during his watch below.

It is only eight o'clock. I light my cigar, and with my legs wide apart, to assure my stability as the ship rolled, I begin to walk up and down the deck. The deck is already abandoned by the first-class passengers, and I am almost alone. On the bridge is the mate, pacing backward and forward, and watching the course he has given to the man at the wheel, who is close to him. The paddles are impetuously beating into the sea, and now and then breaking into thunder, as one or the other of the wheels runs wild, as the rolling lifts it clear of the water. A thick smoke rises from the funnel, which occasionally belches forth a shower of sparks.

At nine o'clock the night is very dark. I try to make out some steamer's lights in the distance, but in vain, for the Caspian has not many ships on it. I can hear only the cry of the sea birds, gulls and scoters, who are abandoning themselves to the caprices of the wind.

During my promenade, one thought besets me: is the voyage to end without my getting anything out of it as copy for my journal? My instructions made me responsible for producing something, and surely not without reason. What? Not an adventure from Tiflis to Pekin? Evidently that could only be my fault! And I resolved to do everything to avoid such a misfortune.

It is half-past ten when I sit down on one of the seats in the stern of the Astara. But with this increasing wind it is impossible for me to remain there. I rise, therefore, and make my way forward. Under the bridge, between the paddle boxes, the wind is so strong that I seek shelter among the packages covered by the tarpaulin. Stretched on one of the boxes, wrapped in my rug, with my head resting against the tarpaulin, I shall soon be asleep.

After some time, I do not exactly know how much, I am awakened by a curious noise. Whence comes this noise? I listen more attentively. It seems as though some one is snoring close to my ear.

"That is some steerage passenger," I think. "He has got under the tarpaulin between the cases, and he will not do so badly in his improvised cabin."

By the light which filters down from the lower part of the binnacle, I see nothing.

I listen again. The noise has ceased.

I look about. There is no one on this part of the deck, for the second-class passengers are all forward.

Then I must have been dreaming, and I resume my position and try again to sleep.

This time there is no mistake. The snoring has begun again, and I am sure it is coming from the case against which I am leaning my head.

"Goodness!" I say. "There must be an animal in here!"

An animal? What? A dog? A cat? Why have they hidden a domestic animal in this case? Is it a wild animal? A panther, a tiger, a lion?

Now I am off on the trail! It must be a wild animal on its way from some menagerie to some sultan of Central Asia. This case is a cage, and if the cage opens, if the animal springs out onto the deck--here is an incident, here is something worth chronicling; and here I am with my professional enthusiasm running mad. I must know at all costs to whom this wild beast is being sent; is it going to Uzon Ada, or is it going to China? The address ought to be on the case.

I light a wax vesta, and as I am sheltered from the wind, the flame keeps upright.

By its light what do I read?

The case containing the wild beast is the very one with the address:

"Mademoiselle Zinca Klork, Avenue Cha-Coua, Pekin, China."

Fragile, my wild beast! Keep from damp, my lion! Quite so! But for what does Miss Zinca Klork, this pretty--for the Roumanian ought to be

pretty, and she is certainly a Roumanian--for what does she want a wild beast sent in this way?

Let us think about it and be reasonable. This animal, whatever it may be, must eat and drink. From the time it starts from Uzon Ada it will take eleven days to cross Asia, and reach the capital of the Celestial Empire. Well, what do they give it to drink, what do they give it to eat, if he is not going to get out of his cage, if he is going to be shut up during the whole of the journey? The officials of the Grand Transasiatic will be no more careful in their attentions to the said wild beast than if he were a glass, for he is described as such; and he will die of inanition!

All these things sent my brain whirling. My thoughts bewildered me. "Is it a lovely dream that dazes me, or am I awake?" as Margaret says in Faust, more lyrically than dramatically. To resist is impossible. I have a two-pound weight on each eyelid. I lay down along by the tarpaulin; my rug wraps me more closely, and I fall into a deep sleep.

How long have I slept? Perhaps for three or four hours. One thing is certain, and that is that it is not yet daylight when I awake.

I rub my eyes, I rise, I go and lean against the rail.

The Astará is not so lively, for the wind has shifted to the northeast.

The night is cold. I warm myself by walking about briskly for half an hour. I think no more of my wild beast. Suddenly remembrance returns to me. Should I not call the attention of the stationmaster to this disquieting case? But that is no business of mine. We shall see before we start.

I look at my watch. It is only three o'clock in the morning. I will go back to my place. And I do so with my head against the side of the case. I shut my eyes.

Suddenly there is a new sound. This time I am not mistaken. A half-stifled sneeze shakes the side of the case. Never did an animal sneeze like that!

Is it possible? A human being is hidden in this case and is being fraudulently carried by the Grand Transasiatic to the pretty Roumanian! But is it a man or a woman? It seems as though the sneeze had a masculine sound about it.

It is impossible to sleep now. How long the day is coming! How eager I am to examine this box! I wanted incidents--well! and here is one, and if I do not get five lines out of this--

The eastern horizon grows brighter. The clouds in the zenith are the first to color. The sun appears at last all watery with the mists of the sea.

I look; it is indeed the case addressed to Peking. I notice that certain holes are pierced here and there, by which the air inside can be renewed. Perhaps two eyes are looking through these holes, watching what is going on outside? Do not be indiscreet!

At breakfast gather all the passengers whom the sea has not affected: the young Chinaman, Major Noltitz, Ephrinell, Miss Bluett, Monsieur Caterna, the Baron Weisschnitzerdörfer, and seven or eight other passengers. I am careful not to let the American into the secret of the case. He would be guilty of some indiscretion, and then good-bye to my news par!

About noon the land is reported to the eastward, a low, yellowish land, with no rocky margin, but a few sandhills in the neighborhood of Krasnovodsk.

In an hour we are in sight of Uzun Ada, and twenty-seven minutes afterward we set foot in Asia.