

CHAPTER V.

Travelers used to land at Mikhailov, a little port at the end of the Transcaspian line; but ships of moderate tonnage hardly had water enough there to come alongside. On this account, General Annenkof, the creator of the new railway, the eminent engineer whose name will frequently recur in my narrative, was led to found Uzun Ada, and thereby considerably shorten the crossing of the Caspian. The station was built in three months, and it was opened on the 8th of May, 1886.

Fortunately I had read the account given by Boulangier, the engineer, relating to the prodigious work of General Annenkof, so that I shall not be so very much abroad during the railway journey between Uzun Ada and Samarkand, and, besides, I trust to Major Noltitz, who knows all about the matter. I have a presentiment that we shall become good friends, and in spite of the proverb which says, "Though your friend be of honey do not lick him!" I intend to "lick" my companion often enough for the benefit of my readers.

We often hear of the extraordinary rapidity with which the Americans have thrown their railroads across the plains of the Far West. But the Russians are in no whit behind them, if even they have not surpassed them in rapidity as well as in industrial audacity.

People are fully acquainted with the adventurous campaign of General

Skobelev against the Turkomans, a campaign of which the building of the railway assured the definite success. Since then the political state of Central Asia has been entirely changed, and Turkestan is merely a province of Asiatic Russia, extending to the frontiers of the Chinese Empire. And already Chinese Turkestan is very visibly submitting to the Muscovite influence which the vertiginous heights of the Pamir plateau have not been able to check in its civilizing march.

I was about to cross the countries which were formerly ravaged by Tamerlane and Genghis Khan, those fabulous countries of which the Russians in 1886 possessed six hundred and fifteen thousand square kilometres, with thirteen hundred thousand inhabitants. The southern part of this region now forms the Transcaspian province, divided into six districts, Fort Alexandrovski, Krasnovodsk, Askhabad, Karibent, Merv, Pendjeh, governed by Muscovite colonels or lieutenant-colonels.

As may be imagined, it hardly takes an hour to see Uzun Ada, the name of which means Long Island. It is almost a town, but a modern town, traced with a square, drawn with a line or a large carpet of yellow sand. No monuments, no memories, bridges of planks, houses of wood, to which comfort is beginning to add a few mansions in stone. One can see what this, first station of the Transcaspian will be like in fifty years; a great city after having been a great railway station.

Do not think that there are no hotels. Among others there is the Hôtel du Czar, which has a good table, good rooms and good beds. But the question of beds has no interest for me. As the train starts at four

o'clock this afternoon, to begin with, I must telegraph to the Twentieth Century, by the Caspian cable, that I am at my post at the Uzun Ada station. That done, I can see if I can pick up anything worth reporting.

Nothing is more simple. It consists in opening an account with those of my companions with whom I may have to do during the journey. That is my custom, I always find it answers, and while waiting for the unknown, I write down the known in my pocketbook, with a number to distinguish each:

1. Fulk Ephrinell, American.
2. Miss Horatia Bluett, English.
3. Major Noltitz, Russian.
4. Monsieur Caterna, French.
5. Madame Caterna, French.
6. Baron Weisschnitzerdörfer, German.

As to the Chinese, they will have a number later on, when I have made up my mind about them. As to the individual in the box, I intend to enter into communication with him, or her, and to be of assistance in that quarter if I can do so without betraying the secret.

The train is already marshaled in the station. It is composed of first and second-class cars, a restaurant car and two baggage vans. These cars are painted of a light color, an excellent precaution against the heat and against the cold. For in the Central Asian provinces the

temperature ranges between fifty degrees centigrade above zero and twenty below, and in a range of seventy degrees it is only prudent to minimize the effects.

These cars are in a convenient manner joined together by gangways, on the American plan. Instead of being shut up in a compartment, the traveler strolls about along the whole length of the train. There is room to pass between the stuffed seats, and in the front and rear of each car are the platforms united by the gangways. This facility of communication assures the security of the train.

Our engine has a bogie on four small wheels, and is thus able to negotiate the sharpest curves; a tender with water and fuel; then come a front van, three first-class cars with twenty-four places each, a restaurant car with pantry and kitchen, four second-class cars and a rear van; in all twelve vehicles, counting in the locomotive and tender. The first class cars are provided with dressing rooms, and their seats, by very simple mechanism, are convertible into beds, which, in fact, are indispensable for long journeys. The second-class travelers are not so comfortably treated, and besides, they have to bring their victuals with them, unless they prefer to take their meals at the stations. There are not many, however, who travel the complete journey between the Caspian and the eastern provinces of China--that is to say about six thousand kilometres. Most of them go to the principal towns and villages of Russian Turkestan, which have been reached by the Transcaspian Railway for some years, and which up to the Chinese frontier has a length of over 1,360 miles.

This Grand Transasiatic has only been open six weeks and the company is as yet only running two trains a week. All has gone well up to the present; but I ought to add the significant detail that the railway men carry a supply of revolvers to arm the passengers with if necessary. This is a wise precaution in crossing the Chinese deserts, where an attack on the train is not improbable.

I believe the company are doing their best to ensure the punctuality of their trains; but the Chinese section is managed by Celestials, and who knows what has been the past life of those people? Will they not be more intent on the security of their dividends than of their passengers?

As I wait for the departure I stroll about on the platform, looking through the windows of the cars, which have no doors along the sides, the entrances being at the ends.

Everything is new; the engine is as bright as it can be, the carriages are brilliant in their new paint, their springs have not begun to give with wear, and their wheels run true on the rails. Then there is the rolling stock with which we are going to cross a continent. There is no railway as long as this--not even in America. The Canadian line measures five thousand kilometres, the Central Union, five thousand two hundred and sixty, the Santa Fe line, four thousand eight hundred and seventy-five, the Atlantic Pacific, five thousand six hundred and thirty, the Northern Pacific, six thousand two hundred and fifty. There is only one line which will be longer when it is finished, and that is

the Grand Transsiberian, from the Urals to Vladivostock, which will measure six thousand five hundred kilometres.

Between Tiflis and Peking our journey will not last more than thirteen days, from Uzun Ada it will only last eleven. The train will only stop at the smaller stations to take in fuel and water. At the chief towns like Merv, Bokhara, Samarkand, Tashkend, Kachgar, Kokhand, Sou Tcheou, Lan Tcheou, Tai Youan, it will stop a few hours--and that will enable me to do these towns in reporter style.

Of course, the same driver and stoker will not take us through. They will be relieved every six hours. Russians will take us up to the frontier of Turkestan, and Chinese will take us on through China.

But there is one representative of the company who will not leave his post, and that is Popof, our head guard, a true Russian of soldierly bearing, hairy and bearded, with a folded overcoat and a Muscovite cap. I intend to talk a good deal with this gallant fellow, although he is not very talkative. If he does not despise a glass of vodka, opportunity offered, he may have a good deal to say to me; for ten years he has been on the Transcaspian between Uzun Ada and the Pamirs, and during the last month he has been all along the line to Peking.

I call him No. 7 in my notebook, and I hope he will give me information enough. I only want a few incidents of the journey, just a few little incidents worthy of the Twentieth Century.

Among the passengers I see on the platform are a few Jews, recognizable more by their faces than their attire. Formerly, in Central Asia, they could only wear the "toppe," a sort of round cap, and a plain rope belt, without any silk ornamentation--under pain of death. And I am told that they could ride on asses in certain towns and walk on foot in others. Now they wear the oriental turban and roll in their carriages if their purse allows of it. Who would hinder them now they are subjects of the White Czar, Russian citizens, rejoicing in civil and political rights equal to those of their Turkoman compatriots?

There are a few Tadjiks of Persian origin, the handsomest men you can imagine. They have booked for Merv, or Bokhara, or Samarkand, or Tachkend, or Kokhand, and will not pass the Russo-Chinese frontier. As a rule they are second-class passengers. Among the first-class passengers I noticed a few Usbegs of the ordinary type, with retreating foreheads and prominent cheek bones, and brown complexions, who were the lords of the country, and from whose families come the emirs and khans of Central Asia.

But are there not any Europeans in this Grand Transasiatic train? It must be confessed that I can only count five or six. There are a few commercial travelers from South Russia, and one of those inevitable gentlemen from the United Kingdom, who are inevitably to be found on the railways and steamboats. It is still necessary to obtain permission to travel on the Transcaspian, permission which the Russian administration does not willingly accord to an Englishman; but this man has apparently been able to get one.

And he seems to me to be worth notice. He is tall and thin, and looks quite the fifty years that his gray hairs proclaim him to be. His characteristic expression is one of haughtiness, or rather disdain, composed in equal parts of love of all things English and contempt for all things that are not. This type is occasionally so insupportable, even to his compatriots, that Dickens, Thackeray and others have often made fun of it. How he turned up his nose at the station at Uzun Ada, at the train, at the men, at the car in which he had secured a seat by placing in it his traveling bag! Let us call him No. 8 in my pocketbook.

There seem to be no personages of importance. That is a pity. If only the Emperor of Russia, on one side, or the Son of Heaven, on the other, were to enter the train to meet officially on the frontier of the two empires, what festivities there would be, what grandeur, what descriptions, what copy for letters and telegrams!

It occurs to me to have a look at the mysterious box. Has it not a right to be so called? Yes, certainly. I must really find out where it has been put and how to get at it easily.

The front van is already full of Ephrinnell's baggage. It does not open at the side, but in front and behind, like the cars. It is also furnished with a platform and a gangway. An interior passage allows the guard to go through it to reach the tender and locomotive if necessary. Popof's little cabin is on the platform of the first car, in the left-hand corner. At night it will be easy for me to visit the van, for

it is only shut in by the doors at the ends of the passage arranged between the packages. If this van is reserved for luggage registered through to China, the luggage for the Turkestan stations ought to be in the van at the rear.

When I arrived the famous box was still on the platform.

In looking at it closely I observe that airholes have been bored on each of its sides, and that on one side it has two panels, one of which can be made to slide on the other from the inside. And I am led to think that the prisoner has had it made so in order that he can, if necessary, leave his prison--probably during the night.

Just now the porters are beginning to lift the box. I have the satisfaction of seeing that they attend to the directions inscribed on it. It is placed, with great care, near the entrance to the van, on the left, the side with the panels outward, as if it were the door of a cupboard. And is not the box a cupboard? A cupboard I propose to open?

It remains to be seen if the guard in charge of the luggage is to remain in this van. No. I find that his post is just outside it.

"There it is, all right!" said one of the porters, looking to see that the case was as it should be, top where top should be, and so on.

"There is no fear of its moving," said another porter; "the glass will reach Peking all right, unless the train runs off the metals."

"Or it does not run into anything," said the other; "and that remains to be seen."

They were right--these good fellows--it remained to be seen--and it would be seen.

The American came up to me and took a last look at his stock of incisors, molars and canines, with a repetition of his invariable "Wait a bit."

"You know, Monsieur Bombarnac," he said to me, "that the passengers are going to dine at the Hôtel du Czar before the departure of the train.

It is time now. Will you come with me?"

"I follow you."

And we entered the dining room. All my numbers are there: 1, Ephrinell, taking his place as usual by the side of 2, Miss Horatia Bluett. The French couple, 4 and 5, are also side by side. Number 3, that is Major Noltitz, is seated in front of numbers 9 and 10, the two Chinese to whom I have just given numbers in my notebook. As to the fat German, number 6, he has already got his long nose into his soup plate. I see also that the Guard Popol, number 7, has his place at the foot of the table. The other passengers, Europeans and Asiatics, are installed, passim with the evident intention of doing justice to the repast.

Ah! I forgot my number 8, the disdainful gentleman whose name I don't yet know, and who seems determined to find the Russian cookery inferior to the English.

I also notice with what attention Monsieur Caterna looks after his wife, and encourages her to make up for the time lost when she was unwell on board the Astara. He keeps her glass filled, he chooses the best pieces for her, etc.

"What a good thing it is," I hear him say, "that we are not to leeward of the Teuton, for there would be nothing left for us!"

He is to windward of him--that is to say, the dishes reach him before they get to the baron, which, however, does not prevent his clearing them without shame.

The observation, in sea language, made me smile, and Caterna, noticing it, gave me a wink with a slight movement of the shoulder toward the baron.

It is evident that these French people are not of high distinction, they do not belong to the upper circles; but they are good people, I will answer for it, and when we have to rub shoulders with compatriots, we must not be too particular in Turkestan.

The dinner ends ten minutes before the time fixed for our departure. The bell rings and we all make a move for the train, the engine of

which is blowing off steam.

Mentally, I offer a last prayer to the God of reporters and ask him not to spare me adventures. Then, after satisfying myself that all my numbers are in the first-class cars, so that I can keep an eye on them, I take my place.

The Baron Weisschnitzerdörfer--what an interminable name--is not behindhand this time. On the contrary, it is the train this time which is five minutes late in starting; and the German has begun to complain, to chafe and to swear, and threatens to sue the company for damages. Ten thousand roubles--not a penny less!--if it causes him to fail. Fail in what, considering that he is going to Peking?

At length the last shriek of the whistle cleaves the air, the cars begin to move, and a loud cheer salutes the departure of the Grand Transasiatic express.