

## CHAPTER VI.

The ideas of a man on horseback are different to those which occur to him when he is on foot. The difference is even more noticeable when he is on the railway. The association of his thoughts, the character of his reflections are all affected by the speed of the train. They "roll" in his head, as he rolls in his car. And so it comes about that I am in a particularly lively mood, desirous of observing, greedy of instruction, and that at a speed of thirty-one miles an hour. That is the rate at which we are to travel through Turkestan, and when we reach the Celestial Empire we shall have to be content with eighteen.

That is what I have just ascertained by consulting my time-table, which I bought at the station. It is accompanied by a long slip map, folded and refolded on itself, which shows the whole length of the line between the Caspian and the eastern coast of China. I study, then, my Transasiatic, on leaving Uzun Ada, just as I studied my Transgeorgian when I left Tiflis.

The gauge of the line is about sixty-three inches--as is usual on the Russian lines, which are thus about four inches wider than those of other European countries. It is said, with regard to this, that the Germans have made a great number of axles of this length, in case they have to invade Russia. I should like to think that the Russians have taken the same precautions in the no less probable event of their

having to invade Germany.

On either side of the line are long sandhills, between which the train runs out from Uzun Ada; when it reaches the arm of the sea which separates Long Island from the continent, it crosses an embankment about 1,200 yards long, edged with masses of rock to protect it against the violence of the waves.

We have already passed several stations without stopping, among others Mikhailov, a league from Uzun Ada. Now they are from ten to eleven miles apart. Those I have seen, as yet, look like villas, with balustrades and Italian roofs, which has a curious effect in Turkestan and the neighborhood of Persia. The desert extends up to the neighborhood of Uzun Ada, and the railway stations form so many little oases, made by the hand of man. It is man, in fact, who has planted these slender, sea-green poplars, which give so little shade; it is man who, at great expense, has brought here the water whose refreshing jets fall back into an elegant vase. Without these hydraulic works there would not be a tree, not a corner of green in these oases. They are the nurses of the line, and dry-nurses are of no use to locomotives.

The truth is that I have never seen such a bare, arid country, so clear of vegetation; and it extends for one hundred and fifty miles from Uzun Ada. When General Annenkof commenced his works at Mikhailov, he was obliged to distil the water from the Caspian Sea, as if he were on board ship. But if water is necessary to produce steam, coal is necessary to vaporize the water. The readers of the Twentieth Century

will ask how are the furnaces fed in a country in which there is neither coal nor wood? Are there stores of these things at the principal stations of the Transcaspian? Not at all. They have simply put in practice an idea which occurred to our great chemist, Sainte-Claire Deville, when first petroleum was used in France. The furnaces are fed, by the aid of a pulverizing apparatus, with the residue produced from the distillation of the naphtha, which Baku and Derbent produce in such inexhaustible quantities. At certain stations on the line there are vast reservoirs of this combustible mineral, from which the tenders are filled, and it is burned in specially adapted fireboxes. In a similar way naphtha is used on the steamboats on the Volga and the other affluents of the Caspian.

I repeat, the country is not particularly varied. The ground is nearly flat in the sandy districts, and quite flat in the alluvial plains, where the brackish water stagnates in pools. Nothing could be better for a line of railway. There are no cuttings, no embankments, no viaducts, no works of art--to use a term dear to engineers, very "dear," I should say. Here and there are a few wooden bridges from two hundred to three hundred feet long. Under such circumstances the cost per kilometre of the Transcaspian did not exceed seventy-five thousand francs.

The monotony of the journey would only be broken on the vast oases of Merv, Bokhara and Samarkand.

But let us busy ourselves with the passengers, as we can do all the

more easily from our being able to walk from one end to the other of the train. With a little imagination we can make ourselves believe we are in a sort of traveling village, and I am just going to take a run down main street.

Remember that the engine and tender are followed by the van at the angle of which is placed the mysterious case, and that Popof's compartment is in the left-hand corner of the platform of the first car.

Inside this car I notice a few Sarthes of tall figure and haughty face, draped in their long robes of bright colors, from beneath which appear the braided leather boots. They have splendid eyes, a superb beard, arched nose, and you would take them for real lords, provided we ignore the word Sarthe, which means a pedlar, and these were going evidently to Tachkend, where these pedlars swarm.

In this car the two Chinese have taken their places, opposite each other. The young Celestial looks out of window. The old one--Ta-lao-ye, that is to say, a person well advanced in years--is incessantly turning over the pages of his book. This volume, a small 32mo, looks like our *Annuaire du Bureau des Longitudes*, and is covered in plush, like a breviary, and when it is shut its covers are kept in place by an elastic band. What astonishes me is that the proprietor of this little book does not seem to read it from right to left. Is it not written in Chinese characters? We must see into this!

On two adjoining seats are Ephrinell and Miss Horatia Bluett. Their

talk is of nothing but figures. I don't know if the practical American murmurs at the ear of the practical Englishwoman the adorable verse which made the heart of Lydia palpitate:

"Nee tecum possum vivere sine te,"

but I do know that Ephrinell can very well live without me. I have been quite right in not reckoning on his company to charm away the tedium of the journey. The Yankee has completely "left" me--that is the word--for this angular daughter of Albion.

I reach the platform. I cross the gangway and I am at the door of the second car.

In the right-hand corner is Baron Weisschnitzerdörfer. His long nose--this Teuton is as short-sighted as a mole--rubs the lines of the book he reads. The book is the time-table. The impatient traveler is ascertaining if the train passes the stations at the stated time.

Whenever it is behind there are new recriminations and menaces against the Grand Transasiatic Company.

In this car there are also the Caternas, who have made themselves quite comfortable. In his cheery way, the husband is talking with a good deal of gesticulation, sometimes touching his wife's hands, sometimes putting his arms round her waist; and then he turns his head toward the platform and says something aside. Madame Caterna leans toward him, makes little confused grimaces, and then leans back into the corner and

seems to reply to her husband, who in turn replies to her. And as I leave I hear the chorus of an operetta in the deep voice of Monsieur Caterna.

In the third car, occupied by many Turkomans and three or four Russians, I perceive Major Noltitz. He is talking with one of his countrymen. I will willingly join in their conversation if they make me any advances, but I had better maintain a certain reserve; the journey has only begun.

I then visit the dining car. It is a third longer than the other cars, a regular dining room, with one long table. At the back is a pantry on one side, a kitchen on the other, where the cook and steward are at work, both of them Russians. This dining car appears to me capitally arranged. Passing through it, I reach the second part of the train, where the second-class passengers are installed. Kirghizes who do not look very intelligent with their depressed heads, their prognathous jaws stuck well out in front, their little beards, flat Cossack noses and very brown skins. These wretched fellows are Mahometans and belong either to the Grand Horde wandering on the frontier between China and Siberia, or to the Little Horde between the Ural Mountains and the Aral Sea. A second-class car, or even a third-class car, is a palace for these people, accustomed to the encampments on the Steppes, to the miserable "iourts" of villages. Neither their beds nor their seats are as good as the stuffed benches on which they have seated themselves with true Asiatic gravity.

With them are two or three Nogais going to Eastern Turkestan. Of a higher race than the Kirghizes, being Tartars, it is from them that come the learned men and professors who have made illustrious the opulent cities of Bokhara and Samarkand. But science and its teaching do not yield much of a livelihood, even when reduced to the mere necessities of life, in these provinces of Central Asia. And so these Nogais take employment as interpreters. Unfortunately, since the diffusion of the Russian language, their trade is not very remunerative.

Now I know the places of my numbers, and I know where to find them when I want them. As to those going through to Peking, I have no doubt of Ephrussi and Miss Horatia Bluett nor the German baron, nor the two Chinese, nor Major Noltitz, nor the Caternas, nor even for the haughty gentleman whose bony outline I perceive in the corner of the second car.

As to these travelers who are not going across the frontier, they are of most perfect insignificance in my eyes. But among my companions I have not yet found the hero of my chronicle! let us hope he will declare himself as we proceed.

My intention is to take notes hour by hour--what did I say? To "minute" my journey. Before the night closes in I go out on the platform of the car to have a last look at the surrounding country. An hour with my cigar will take me to Kizil Arvat, where the train has to stop for some time. In going from the second to the first car I meet Major Noltitz. I step aside to let him pass. He salutes me with that grace which distinguishes well-bred Russians. I return his salute. Our meeting is

restricted to this exchange of politeness, but the first step is taken.

Popof is not just now in his seat. The door of the luggage van being open, I conclude that the guard has gone to talk with the driver. On the left of the van the mysterious box is in its place. It is only half-past six as yet, and there is too much daylight for me to risk the gratification of my curiosity.

The train advances through the open desert. This is the Kara Koum, the Black Desert. It extends from Khiva over all Turkestan comprised between the Persian frontier and the course of the Amou Daria. In reality the sands of the Kara Koum are no more black than the waters of the Black Sea or than those of the White Sea are white, those of the Red Sea red, or those of the Yellow River yellow. But I like these colored distinctions, however erroneous they may be. In landscapes the eye is caught by colors. And is there not a good deal of landscape about geography?

It appears that this desert was formerly occupied by a huge central basin. It has dried up, as the Caspian will dry up, and this evaporation is explained by the powerful concentration of the solar rays on the surface of the territories between the Sea of Aral and the Plateau of the Pamir.

The Kara Koum is formed of low sandy hills which the high winds are constantly shifting and forming. These "barkans," as the Russians call them, vary in height from thirty to ninety feet. They expose a wide



surface to the northern hurricanes which drive them gradually southward. And on this account there is a well-justified fear for the safety of the Transcaspian. It had to be protected in some efficacious way, and General Annenkof would have been much embarrassed if provident Nature had not, at the same time as she gave the land favorable for the railway to be laid along, given the means of stopping the shifting of the barkanes.

Behind these sand hills grow a number of spring shrubs, clumps of tamarisk, star thistles, and that *Haloxylon ammodendron* which Russians call, not so scientifically, "saksaoul." Its deep, strong roots are as well adapted for binding together the ground as those of *Hippophaë rhamnoides*, an arbutus of the Eleagnaceous family, which is used for binding together the sands in southern Europe.

To these plantations of saksaouls the engineers of the line have added in different places a series of slopes of worked clay, and in the most dangerous places a line of palisades.

These precautions are doubtless of use; but if the road is protected, the passengers are hardly so, when the sand flies like a bullet hail, and the wind sweeps up from the plain the whitish efflorescences of salt. It is a good thing for us that we are not in the height of the hot season; and it is not in June or July or August that I would advise you to take a trip on the Grand Transasiatic.

I am sorry that Major Noltitz does not think of coming out on the

gangway to breathe the fresh air of the Kara Koum. I would offer him one of those choice regalias with which my case is well provided. He would tell me if these stations I see on my time-table, Balla-Ischem, Aïdine, Pereval, Kansandjik, Ouchak, are of any interest--which they do not seem to be. But it would not do for me to disturb his siesta. And yet his conversation ought to be interesting, for as a surgeon in the Russian army he took part in the campaigns of Generals Skobeleff and Annenkof. When our train ran through the little stations that it honors only with a whistle, he could tell me if this one or that one had been the scene of any incident of the war. As a Frenchman I am justified in questioning him about the Russian expedition across Turkestan, and I have no doubt that my fellow passenger will be pleased to gratify me. He is the only one I can really trust besides Popof.

But why is Popof not in his seat? He also is not insensible to the charms of a cigar. It would seem that his conversation with the engineer has not finished yet.

Ah! Here he is coming from the front of the luggage van. He comes out of it and shuts the door; he remains for a moment and is about to take a seat. A hand which holds a cigar, is stretched out toward him. Popof smiles and soon his perfumed puffs are mingling voluptuously with mine.

For fifteen years I think I said our guard had been in the Transcaspian service. He knows the country up to the Chinese frontier, and five or six times already he has been over the whole line known as the Grand Transasiatic.

Popof was on duty on the section between Mikhailov and Kizil Arvat when the line opened--a section which was begun in the December of 1880 and finished in ten months, in November, 1881. Five years later the locomotive entered Merv, on the 14th July, 1886, and eighteen months later it was welcomed at Samarkand. Now the road through Turkestan joins the road through the Celestial Empire, and the ribbon of iron extends without interruption from the Caspian Sea to Peking.

When Popof had given me this information, I asked if he knew anything of our fellow travelers, I meant those who were going through to China. And in the first place of Major Noltitz?

"The major," said Popof, "has lived a long time in the Turkestan provinces, and he is going to Peking to organize the staff of a hospital for our compatriots, with the permission of the Czar, of course."

"I like this Major Noltitz," I said, "and I hope to make his acquaintance very soon."

"He would be equally pleased to make yours," replied Popof.

"And these two Chinese, do you know them?"

"Not in the least, Monsieur Bombarnac; all I know is the name on the luggage."

"What is that?"

"The younger man's name is Pan-Chao, the elder's is Tio-King. Probably they have been traveling in Europe for some years. As to saying where they come from, I cannot. I imagine that Pan-Chao belongs to some rich family, for he is accompanied by his doctor."

"This Tio-King?"

"Yes, Doctor Tio-King."

"And do they only speak Chinese?"

"Probably; I have not heard them speak any other language together."

On this information from Popof, I will keep to the number nine I have given to young Pan-Chao, and to the ten with which I have labelled Doctor Tio-King.

"The American," began Popof.

"Ephrinell?" I exclaimed, "and Miss Horatia Bluett, the Englishwoman? Oh! You can tell me nothing about them I don't know."

"Shall I tell you what I think about that couple, Monsieur Bombarnac?"

"What do you think?"

"That as soon as they reach Peking, Miss Bluett will become Mrs. Ephrinell."

"And may Heaven bless their union, Popof, for they are really made for each other."

I saw that on this subject Popof and I held similar ideas.

"And the two French people, that couple so affectionate." I asked, "who are they?"

"Have they not told you?"

"No, Popof."

"You need not be anxious, Monsieur Bombarnac. Besides, if you wish to know their profession, it is written at full length on all their luggage."

"And that is?"

"Stage people who are going to a theater in China."

Stage people! If that explains the attitudes, and mobile physiognomy, and demonstrative gestures of Caterna, it does not explain his maritime allusions.

"And do you know what line these players are in?"

"The husband is comic lead."

"And the wife?"

"She is leading lady."

"And where are these lyrical people going?"

"To Shanghai, where they have an engagement at the French theater."

That is capital. I will talk about the theater, and behind the scenes, and such matters, and, as Popof said, I shall soon make the acquaintance of the cheery comedian and his charming wife. But it is not in their company that I shall discover the hero of romance who is the object of my desire.

As to the scornful gentleman, our guide knew nothing beyond that his luggage bore the address in full: Sir Francis Trevellyan, Trevellyan Hall, Trevellyanshire.

"A gentleman who does not answer when he is spoken to!" added Popof.

Well, my number eight will have to be dumb man, and that will do very well.

"Now we get to the German," said I.

"Baron Weisschnitzerdörfer?"

"He is going to Peking, I think."

"To Peking and beyond."

"Beyond?"

"Yes; he is on a trip round the world."

"A trip round the world?"

"In thirty-nine days."

And so after Mrs. Bisland who did the famous tour in seventy-three days, and Train who did it in seventy, this German was attempting to do it in thirty-nine?

True, the means of communication are more rapid the line is more direct, and by using the Grand Transasiatic which puts Peking within a fortnight of the Prussian capital, the baron might halve the old time by Suez and Singapore--but--

"He will never do it!" I exclaimed.

"Why not?" asked Popof.

"Because he is always late. He nearly missed the train at Tiflis, he nearly missed the boat at Baku--"

"But he did not miss the start from Uzun Ada."

"It doesn't matter, Popof. I shall be much surprised if this German beats an American at globe trotting."

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