

CHAPTER VII.

The train arrived at Kizil Arvat, two hundred and forty-two versts from the Caspian, at thirteen minutes past seven in the evening instead of seven o'clock. This slight delay provoked thirteen objurgations from the baron, one for each minute.

We have two hours to wait at Kizil Arvat. Although the day is closing in, I could not employ my time better than in visiting this little town, which contains more than two thousand inhabitants, Russians, Persians and Turkomans. There is not much to see, however, either within it or around it; there are no trees--not even a palm tree--only pasturages and fields of cereals, watered by a narrow stream. My good fortune furnished me with a companion, or I should rather say a guide, in Major Noltitz.

Our acquaintance was made very simply. The major came up to me, and I went up to him as soon as we set foot on the platform of the railway station.

"Sir," said I, "I am a Frenchman, Claudius Bombarnac, special correspondent of the Twentieth Century, and you are Major Noltitz of the Russian army. You are going to Peking, so am I. I can speak your language, and it is very likely that you can speak mine."

The major made a sign of assent.

"Well, Major Noltitz, instead of remaining strangers to each other during the long transit of Central Asia, would it please you for us to become more than mere traveling companions? You know all about this country that I do not know, and it would be a pleasure for me to learn from you."

"Monsieur Bombarnac," replied the major in French, without a trace of accent, "I quite agree with you."

Then he added with a smile:

"As to learning from me, one of your most eminent critics, if I remember rightly, has said that the French only like to learn what they know."

"I see that you have read Sainte Beuve, Major Noltitz; perhaps this sceptical academician was right in a general way. But for my part, I am an exception to the rule, and I wish to learn what I do not know. And in all that concerns Russian Turkestan, I am in a state of ignorance."

"I am entirely at your disposal," said the major, "and I will be happy to tell you all about General Annenkof, for I was all through the work with him."

"I thank you, Major Noltitz. I expected no less than the courtesy of a

Russian towards a Frenchman."

"And," said the major, "if you will allow me to quote that celebrated sentence in the Danicheffs, 'It will be always thus so long as there are Frenchmen and Russians.'"

"The younger Dumas after Sainte Beuve?" I exclaimed. "I see, major, that I am talking to a Parisian--"

"Of Petersburg, Monsieur Bombarnac."

And we cordially shook hands. A minute afterwards, we were on our way through the town, and this is what Major Noltitz told me:

It was towards the end of 1885 that General Annenkof finished, at Kizil Arvat, the first portion of this railway measuring about 140 miles, of which 90 were through a desert which did not yield a single drop of water. But before telling me how this extraordinary work was accomplished, Major Noltitz reminded me of the facts which had gradually prepared the conquest of Turkestan and its definite incorporation with the Russian Empire.

As far back as 1854 the Russians had imposed a treaty of alliance on the Khan of Khiva. Some years afterwards, eager to pursue their march towards the east, the campaigns of 1860 and 1864 had given them the Khanats of Kokhand and Bokhara. Two years later, Samarkand passed under their dominion after the battles of Irdjar and Zera-Buleh.

There remained to be conquered the southern portion of Turkestan, and chiefly the oasis of Akhal Tekke, which is contiguous to Persia.

Generals Sourakine and Lazareff attempted this in their expeditions of 1878 and 1879. Their plans failed, and it was to the celebrated Skobelev, the hero of Plevna, that the czar confided the task of subduing the valiant Turkoman tribes.

Skobelev landed at the port of Mikhailov--the port of Uzun Ada was not then in existence--and it was in view of facilitating his march across the desert that his second in command, Annenkof, constructed the strategic railway which in ten months reached Kizil Arvat.

This is how the Russians built the line with a rapidity superior, as I have said, to that of the Americans in the far west, a line that was to be of use for commerce and for war.

To begin with, the general got together a construction train consisting of thirty-four wagons. Four of these were two-decked for the officers, twenty more had two decks and were used by the workmen and soldiers; one wagon served as a dining room, four as kitchens, one as an ambulance, one as a telegraph office, one as a forge, one as a provision store, and one was held in reserve. These were his traveling workshops and also his barracks in which fifteen hundred workmen, soldiers and otherwise, found their board and lodging. The train advanced as the rails were laid. The workmen were divided into two brigades; they each worked six hours a day, with the assistance of the

country people who lived in tents and numbered about fifteen thousand. A telegraph wire united the works with Mikhailov, and from there a little Decauville engine worked the trains which brought along the rails and sleepers.

In this way, helped by the horizontality of the ground, a day's work yielded nearly five miles of track, whereas in the plains of the United States only about half that rate was accomplished. Labor cost little; forty-five francs a month for the men from the oasis, fifty centimes a day for those who came from Bokhara.

It was in this way that Skobelev's soldiers were taken to Kizil Arvat, and then eighty-four miles beyond to Gheok Tepe. This town did not surrender until after the destruction of its ramparts and the massacre of twelve thousand of its defenders; but the oasis of Akhal Tekke was in the power of the Russians. The inhabitants of the Atek oasis were only too ready to submit, and that all the more willingly as they had implored the help of the czar in their struggle with Kouli Khan, the chief of the Mervians. These latter to the number of two hundred and fifty thousand, followed their example, and the first locomotive entered Merv station in July, 1886.

"And the English?" I asked Major Noltitz. "In what way have they looked upon the progress of the Russians through Central Asia?"

"Jealously, of course. Think for a moment what it means when the Russian railways are united with the Chinese, instead of the Indian.

The Transcaspian in connection with the line between Herat and Delhi! And consider that the English have not been as fortunate in Afghanistan as we have been in Turkestan. You have noticed the gentleman in our train?"

"I have. He is Sir Francis Trevellyan of Trevellyan Hall, Trevellyanshire."

"Well, Sir Francis Trevellyan has nothing but looks of contempt and shrugs of the shoulder for all we have done. His nation's jealousy is incarnate in him, and England will never be content that our railways should go from Europe to the Pacific Ocean, while the British railways end at the Indian Ocean."

This interesting conversation had lasted for the hour and a half during which we walked about the streets of Kizil Arvat. It was time to return to the station, and we did so.

Of course, matters did not end here. It was agreed that the major should leave his seat in the third car and occupy that next to mine in the first. We had already been two inhabitants of the same town; well, we would become two neighbors in the house, or, rather, two friends in the same room.

At nine o'clock the signal to start was given. The train leaving Kizil Arvat went off in a southwesterly direction towards Askhabad, along the Persian frontier.

For another half hour the major and I continued to talk of one thing or another. He told me that if the sun had not set, I should have been able to see the summits of the Great and Little Balkans of Asia which rise above the bay of Krasnovodsk.

Already most of our companions had taken up their quarters for the night on their seats, which by an ingenious mechanism could be transformed into beds, on which you could stretch yourself at full length, lay your head on a pillow, wrap yourself in rugs, and if you didn't sleep well it would be on account of a troubled conscience.

Major Noltitz had nothing to reproach himself with apparently, for a few minutes after he had said good night he was deep in the sleep of the just.

As for me, if I remained awake it was because I was troubled in my mind. I was thinking of my famous packing case, of the man it contained, and this very night I had resolved to enter into communication with him. I thought of the people who had done this sort of thing before. In 1889, 1891, and 1892, an Austrian tailor, Hermann Zeitung, had come from Vienna to Paris, from Amsterdam to Brussels, from Antwerp to Christiania in a box, and two sweethearts of Barcelona, Erres and Flora Anglora, had shared a box between them from Spain into France.

But I must wait until Popof had retired to rest. The train would not

stop until it reached Gheok Tepe at one o'clock in the morning. During the run from Kizil Arvat to Gheok Tepe I reckoned that Popof would have a good sleep, and then, or never, I would put my plan into execution.

Hold! an idea! Suppose it is Zeitung who makes a trade of this sort of thing and manages to make a little money out of public generosity? It ought to be Zeitung, it must be! Confound it! he is not at all interesting! And here was I reckoning on this fellow. Well, we shall see. I shall know him by his photographs, and perhaps I may make use of him.

Half an hour went by, and the noise of a door shutting on the platform of the car told me that our guard had just entered his little box. In spite of my desire to visit the baggage car I waited patiently, for it was possible that Popof was not yet sound asleep.

Within, all is quiet under the veiled light of the lamps.

Without, the night is very dark, and the rattle of the train mingles with the whistling of the rather high wind.

I rise. I draw aside the curtain of one of the lamps. I look at my watch.

It is a few minutes past eleven. Still two hours to Gheok Tepe.

The moment has come. I glide between the seats to the door of the car.

I open it gently and shut it after me without being heard by my companions, without waking any one.

Here I am on the platform, which shakes as the train travels. Amid the unfathomable darkness which envelops the Kara Koum, I experience the feeling of a night at sea when on shipboard.

A feeble light filters through the blind of the guard's box. Shall I wait till it is extinct, or, as is very probable, will it not last till the morning?

Anyhow, Popof is not asleep, as I discover by the noise he makes in turning over. I keep quiet, leaning against the balustrade of the platform.

Leaning forward my looks are attracted by the luminous ray thrown forward by the headlight of the engine. It seems as though we are running on a road of fire. Above me the clouds are racing across with great rapidity, and a few constellations glitter through their rifts, Cassiopeia, the Little Bear, in the north, and in the zenith Vega of Lyra.

At length absolute silence reigns on the platforms. Popof, who is in charge of the train, has his eyes closed in sleep. Assured of safety I cross the gangway and am in front of the baggage van.

The door is only fastened with a bar which is hung between two staples.

I open it and shut it behind me.

I do this without noise, for if I do not want to attract Popof's attention, I do not want as yet to attract the attention of the man in the packing case.

Although the darkness is deep in the van, although there is no side window, I know my position. I know where the case is placed; it is in the left corner as I enter. The thing is not to knock against any other case--not against one of those belonging to Ephrinell, for what a row there would be if I set all those artificial teeth chattering!

Carefully feeling with feet and hands, I reach the case. No cat could have been more gentle or more silent as I felt its edges.

I leaned over and placed my ear timidly against the outer panel.

There was no sound of breathing.

The products of the house of Strong, Bulbul & Co., of New York, could not be more noiseless in their boxes.

A fear seizes upon me--the fear of seeing all my reporter's hopes vanish. Was I deceived on board the Astara? That respiration, that sneeze; had I dreamed it all? Was there no one in the case, not even Zeitung? Were these really glass goods exported to Miss Zinca Klork,

Avenue Cha-Coua, Pekin, China?

No! Feeble as it is, I detect a movement inside the case! It becomes more distinct, and I ask if the panel is going to slide, if the prisoner is coming out of his prison to breathe the fresh air?

What I had better do to see and not to be seen is to hide between two cases. Thanks to the darkness there is nothing to fear.

Suddenly a slight cracking greets my ear. I am not the sport of an illusion; it is the crack of a match being lighted.

Almost immediately a few feeble rays pierce the ventilation holes of the case.

If I had had any doubts as to the position held by the prisoner in the scale of being, I have none now. At the least it must be an ape who knows the use of fire, and also the handling of matches. Travelers tell us that such animals exist, but we have to take the statement on trust.

Why should I not confess it? A certain emotion came over me and I had to take care I did not run away.

A minute elapsed. Nothing shows that the panel has been moved, nothing gives me reason to suppose that the unknown is coming out.

Cautiously I wait. Then I have an idea to make something out of this

light. The case is lighted within; if I were to peep through those holes?

I creep toward the case. A single apprehension chills my brain. If the light were suddenly extinguished!

I am against the panel, which I take care not to touch, and I put my eyes close to one of the holes.

There is a man in the box, and it is not the Austrian tailor, Zeitung! Thank Heaven! I will soon make him my No. 11.

The man's features I can make out clearly. He is from twenty-five to twenty-six years of age. He does not shave, and his beard is brown. He is of the true Roumanian type, and that confirms me in my notion regarding his Roumanian correspondent. He is good-looking, although his face denotes great energy of character, and he must be energetic to have shut himself up in a box like this for such a long journey. But if he has nothing of the malefactor about him, I must confess that he does not look like the hero I am in search of as the chief personage in my story.

After all, they were not heroes, that Austrian and that Spaniard who traveled in their packing cases. They were young men, very simple, very ordinary, and yet they yielded columns of copy. And so this brave No. 11, with amplifications, antonyms, diaphoreses, epitases, tropes, metaphors, and other figures of that sort, I will beat out, I will

enlarge, I will develop--as they develop a photographic negative.

Besides to travel in a box from Tiflis to Peking is quite another affair than traveling from Vienna or Barcelona to Paris, as was done by Zeitung, Erres and Flora Anglora.

I add that I will not betray my Roumanian; I will report him to no one. He may rely on my discretion; he may reckon on my good offices if I can be of use to him when he is found out.

But what is he doing now? Well, he is seated on the bottom of his case and placidly eating his supper by the light of a little lamp. A box of preserves is on his knee, biscuit is not wanting, and in a little cupboard I notice some full bottles, besides a rug and overcoat hooked up on the wall.

Evidently No. 11 is quite at home. He is there in his cell like a snail in his shell. His house goes with him; and he saves the thousand francs it would have cost him to journey from Tiflis to Peking, second-class. I know he is committing a fraud, and that the law punishes such fraud. He can come out of his box when he likes and take a walk in the van, or even at night venture on the platform. No! I do not blame him, and when I think of his being sent to the pretty Roumanian, I would willingly take his place.

An idea occurs to me which may not perhaps be as good as it seems. That is to rap lightly on the box so as to enter into communication with my

new companion, and learn who he is, and whence he comes, for I know whither he goes. An ardent curiosity devours me, I must gratify it. There are moments when a special correspondent is metamorphosed into a daughter of Eve.

But how will the poor fellow take it? Very well, I am sure. I will tell him that I am a Frenchman, and a Roumanian knows he can always trust a Frenchman. I will offer him my services. I will propose to soften the rigors of his imprisonment by my interviews, and to make up the scarcity of his meals by little odds and ends. He will have nothing to fear from my imprudences.

I rap the panel.

The light suddenly goes out.

The prisoner has suspended his respiration.

I must reassure him.

"Open!" I say to him gently in Russian.

"Open--"

I cannot finish the sentence; for the train gives a sudden jump and slackens speed.

But we cannot yet have reached Gheok Tepe?

There is a noise outside.

I rush out of the van and shut the door behind me.

It was time.

I have scarcely reached the platform before Popofs door opens, and without seeing me he hurries through the van on to the engine.

Almost immediately the train resumes its normal speed and Popof reappears a minute afterwards.

"What is the matter, Popof?"

"What is often the matter, Monsieur Bombarnac. We have smashed a dromedary."

"Poor brute!"

"Poor brute? He might have thrown us off the line!"

"Stupid brute, then!"