

## CHAPTER VIII.

Before the train reaches Gheok Tepe I am back in the car. Confound this dromedary! If he had not managed to get smashed so clumsily No. 11 would no longer be unknown to me. He would have opened his panel, we would have talked in a friendly way, and separated with a friendly shake of the hand. Now he will be full of anxiety, he knows his fraud is discovered, that there is some one who has reason to suspect his intentions, some one who may not hesitate to betray his secret. And then, after being taken out of his case, he will be put under guard at the next station, and it will be useless for Mademoiselle Zinca Klorck to expect him in the capital of the Chinese Empire!

Yes! It would be better for me to relieve his anxiety this very night. That is impossible, for the train will soon stop at Gheok Tepe, and then at Askhabad which it will leave in the first hour of daylight. I can no longer trust to Popof's going to sleep.

I am absorbed in these reflections, when the locomotive stops in Gheok Tepe station at one o'clock in the morning. None of my companions have left their beds.

I get out on to the platform and prowl around the van. It would be too risky to try and get inside. I should have been glad to visit the town, but the darkness prevents me from seeing anything. According to what

Major Noltitz says it still retains the traces of Skobelev's terrible assault in 1880--dismantled walls, bastions in ruins. I must content myself with having seen all that with the major's eyes.

The train starts at two o'clock in the morning, after having been joined by a few passengers who Popof tells me are Turkomans. I will have a look at them when daylight comes.

For ten minutes I remained on the car platform and watched the heights of the Persian frontier on the extreme limit of the horizon. Beyond the stretch of verdant oasis watered by a number of creeks, we crossed wide cultivated plains through which the line made frequent diversions.

Having discovered that Popof did not intend to go to sleep again, I went back to my corner.

At three o'clock there was another stop. The name of Askhabad was shouted along the platform. As I could not remain still I got out, leaving my companions sound asleep, and I ventured into the town.

Askhabad is the headquarters of the Transcaspian, and I opportunely remembered what Boulangier, the engineer, had said about it in the course of that interesting journey he had made to Merv. All that I saw on the left as I went out of the station, was the gloomy outline of the Turkoman Fort, dominating the new town, the population of which has doubled since 1887. It forms a confused mass behind a thick curtain of trees.

When I returned at half-past three, Popof was going through the luggage van, I know not why. What must be the Roumanian's anxiety during this movement to and fro in front of his box!

As soon as Popof reappeared I said to him: "Anything fresh?"

"Nothing, except the morning breeze!" said he.

"Very fresh!" said I. "Is there a refreshment bar in the station?"

"There is one for the convenience of the passengers."

"And for the convenience of the guards, I suppose? Come along, Popof."

And Popof did not want asking twice.

The bar was open, but there did not seem to be much to choose from. The only liquor was "Koumiss," which is fermented mare's milk, and is the color of faded ink, very nourishing, although very liquid. You must be a Tartar to appreciate this koumiss. At least that is the effect it produced on me. But Popof thought it excellent, and that was the important point.

Most of the Sarthes and Kirghizes who got out at Askhabad, have been replaced by other second-class passengers, Afghan merchants and smugglers, the latter particularly clever in their line of business.

All the green tea consumed in Central Asia is brought by them from China through India, and although the transport is much longer, they sell it at a much lower price than the Russian tea. I need not say that their luggage was examined with Muscovite minuteness.

The train started again at four o'clock. Our car was still a sleeper. I envied the sleep of my companions, and as that was all I could do, I returned to the platform.

The dawn was appearing in the east. Here and there were the ruins of the ancient city, a citadel girdled with high ramparts and a succession of long porticos extending over fifteen hundred yards. Running over a few embankments, necessitated by the inequalities of the sandy ground, the train reaches the horizontal steppe.

We are running at a speed of thirty miles an hour in a southwesterly direction, along the Persian frontier. It is only beyond Douchak that the line begins to leave it. During this three hours' run the two stations at which the train stops are Gheours, the junction for the road to Mesched, whence the heights of the Iran plateau are visible, and Artyk where water is abundant although slightly brackish.

The train then traverses the oasis of the Atek, which is an important tributary of the Caspian. Verdure and trees are everywhere. This oasis justifies its name, and would not disgrace the Sahara. It extends to the station of Douchak at the six hundred and sixtieth verst, which we reach at six o'clock in the morning.

We stop here two hours, that is to say, there are two hours for us to walk about. I am off to look at Douchak with Major Noltitz as my cicerone.

A traveler precedes us out of the railway station; I recognize Sir Francis Trevellyan. The major makes me notice that this gentleman's face is more sullen than usual, his lip more scornful, his attitude more Anglo-Saxon.

"And do you know why, Monsieur Bombarnac? Because this station at Douchak might be the terminus of a line from British India through the Afghan frontier, Kandahar, the Bolan Pass and the Pendjeh oasis, that would unite the two systems."

"And how long would the line be?"

"About six hundred miles. But the English will not meet the Russians in a friendly way. But if we could put Calcutta within twelve days of London, what an advantage that would be for their trade!"

Talking in this way the major and I "did" Douchak. Some years ago it was foreseen how important this village would be. A branch line unites it with Teheran in Persia, while there has, as yet, been no survey for a line to India. While gentlemen cast in the mould of Sir Francis Trevellyan are in the majority in the United Kingdom, the Asiatic network of railways will never be complete.

I was led to question the major regarding the safety of the Grand Transasiatic across the provinces of Central Asia.

In Turkestan, he told me, the safety is well assured. The Russian police keep constant watch over it; there is a regular police force at the stations, and as the stations are not far apart, I don't think the travelers have much to fear from the nomad tribes. Besides, the Turkomans are kept in their place by the Russian administration. During the years the Transcaspian has been at work, there has been no attack to hinder the train service.

"That is comforting, Major Noltitz. And as to the section between the frontier and Peking?"

"That is another matter," replied the major. "Over the Pamir plateau, up to Kachgar, the road is carefully guarded; but beyond that, the Grand Transasiatic is under Chinese control, and I have not much confidence in that."

"Are the stations very far from each other?" I asked.

"Very far, sometimes."

"And the Russians in charge of the train are replaced by Chinese, are they not?"

"Yes, with the exception of Popof, who goes through with us."

"So that we shall have Chinese engine drivers and stokers? Well, major, that seems rather alarming, and the safety of the travelers--"

"Let me undeceive you, Monsieur Bombarnac. These Chinese are just as clever as we are. They are excellent mechanics, and it is the same with the engineers who laid out the line through the Celestial Empire. They are certainly a very intelligent race, and very fit for industrial progress."

"I think, major, that they will one day become masters of the world--after the Slavs, of course!"

"I do not know what the future may have in store," said Major Noltitz, with a smile. "But, returning to the Chinese, I say that they are of quick comprehension, with an astonishing facility of assimilation. I have seen them at work, and I speak from experience."

"Agreed," said I; "but if there is no danger under this head, are there not a lot of scoundrels prowling about Mongolia and Northern China?"

"And you think these scoundrels will be daring enough to attack the train?"

"Exactly, major, and that is what makes me feel easy."

"What? Makes you feel easy?"

"Quite so, for my sole anxiety is that our journey may not be devoid of incident."

"Really, Mr. Special Correspondent, I admire you. You must have incidents--"

"As a doctor must have patients. Now a real good adventure--"

"Well, Monsieur Bombarnac, I am afraid you will be disappointed, as I have heard that the company has treated several chiefs of the robber bands--"

"As the Greek Government treated Hadji Stavros in About's romance."

"Precisely; and who knows that if in their wisdom--"

"I don't believe it."

"Why not? It would be quite in the modern style, this way of assuring the safety of the trains during the run through the Celestial Empire. Anyhow, there is one of these highwaymen, who has retained his independence and liberty of action, a certain Ki-Tsang."

"Who is he?"



"A bold bandit chief, half-Chinaman, half-Mongol. Having for some time been a terror to Yunnan, he was being too closely pursued, and has now moved into the northern provinces. His presence has ever been reported in that part of Mongolia served by the Grand Transasiatic."

"Well, he ought to furnish a few paragraphs."

"The paragraphs Ki-Tsang will furnish you with may cost you too dearly."

"Bah! major, the Twentieth Century is quite rich enough to pay for its glory."

"To pay with its money, perhaps, but we may have to pay with our lives! Luckily our companions have not heard you talk in this way, or they might come in a body and demand your expulsion from the train. So be careful, and keep a guard on your desires as a newspaper man in quest of adventures. Above all, don't have anything to do with this Ki-Tsang. It would be all the better in the interest of the passengers."

"But not of the passage, major."

We returned towards the station. The stoppage at Douchak had another half hour to last. As I walked on the quay, I observed something going on which would change the make-up of our train.

Another van had arrived from Teheran by the branch line to Mesphed, which puts the Persian capital in communication with the Transcaspiian.

This van was bolted and barred, and accompanied by a squad of Persian police, whose orders seemed to be not to lose sight of it.

I don't know what made me think so, but it seemed as though this van had something mysterious about it, and as the major had left me, I went and spoke to Popof, who was watching over the proceedings.

"Popof, where is that van going?"

"To Pekin."

"And what has it got in it?"

"What has it got in it? An exalted personage."

"An exalted personage?"

"Are you surprised?"

"I am. In this van?"

"It is his own idea."

"Well, Popof, when this exalted personage gets out perhaps you will let me know?"

"He Will not get out."

"Why not?"

"Because he is dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes, and it is his body they are taking to Peking, where he will be interred with all the honors due to him."

So that we were to have an important personage in our train--in the shape of a corpse, it is true. Never mind! I asked Popoff to discover the name of the defunct. He ought to be some mandarin of mark. As soon as I knew it I would send a telegram to the Twentieth Century.

While I was looking at this van, a new passenger came up and examined it with no less curiosity than I did.

This traveler was a fine-looking man of about forty, wearing gracefully the costume of the richer Mongols, a tall fellow, with rather a gloomy look, a military moustache, tawny complexion, and eyes that never shut.

"Here is a splendid fellow," I said to myself. "I don't know if he will turn out the hero of the drama I am in search of, but, anyhow, I will number him twelve in my traveling troupe."

This leading star, I soon learned from Popof, bore the name of Faruskiar. He was accompanied by another Mongol, of inferior rank, of about the same age, whose name was Ghangir. As they looked at the van being attached to the tail of the train in front of the luggage van, they exchanged a few words. As soon as the arrangements were complete the Persians took their places in the second-class car, which preceded the mortuary van, so as to have the precious corpse always under their surveillance.

At this moment there was a shout on the station platform I recognized the voice. It was the Baron Weisschnitzerdörfer shouting:

"Stop! stop!"

This time it was not a train on the start, but a hat in distress. A sudden gust had swept through the station and borne off the baron's hat--a helmet-shaped hat of a bluish color. It rolled on the platform, it rolled on the rails, it skimmed the enclosure and went out over the wall, and its owner ran his hardest to stop it.

At the sight of this wild pursuit the Caternas held their sides, the young Chinaman, Pan Chao, shouted with laughter, while Dr. Tio-King remained imperturbably serious.

The German purple, puffing and panting, could do no more. Twice he had got his hand on his hat, and twice it had escaped him, and now suddenly he fell full length with his head lost under the folds of his overcoat;

whereupon Caterna began to sing the celebrated air from "Miss Helyett":

"Ah! the superb point of view--ew--ew--ew!

Ah! the view unexpected by you--you--you--you!"

I know nothing more annoying than a hat carried away by the wind, which bounds hither and thither, and spins and jumps, and glides, and slides, and darts off just as you think you are going to catch it. And if that should happen to me I will forgive those who laugh at the comic endeavor.

But the baron was in no mood for forgiveness. He bounded here, and bounded there, he jumped on to the line. They shouted to him, "Look out! look out!" for the Merv was coming in at some speed. It brought death to the hat, the engine smashed it pitilessly, and it was only a torn rag when it was handed to the baron. And then began again a series of imprecations on the Grand Transasiatic.

The signal is given. The passengers, old and new, hurry to their places. Among the new ones I notice three Mongols, of forbidding appearance, who get into the second-class car.

As I put my foot on the platform I hear the young Chinese say to his companion:

"Well, Dr. Tio-King, did you see the German with his performing hat?  
How I laughed!"

And so Pan Chao speaks French. What do I say? Better than French--he speaks Persian! Most extraordinary! I must have a talk with him.