

CHAPTER X.

At a quarter-past twelve our train passed the station of Kari Bata, which resembles one of the stations on the line from Naples to Sorrento, with its Italian roofs. I noticed a vast Asiatico-Russian camp, the flags waving in the fresh breeze. We have entered the Mervian oasis, eighty miles long and eight wide, and containing about six hundred thousand hectares--there is nothing like being precise at the finish. Right and left are cultivated fields, clumps of fine trees, an uninterrupted succession of villages, huts among the thickets, fruit gardens between the houses, flocks of sheep and herds of cattle among the pastures. All this rich country is watered by the Mourgab--the White Water--or its tributaries, and pheasants swarm like crows on the plains of Normandy. At one o'clock in the afternoon the train stopped at Merv Station, over five hundred miles from Uzun Ada.

The town has been often destroyed and rebuilt. The wars of Turkestan have not spared it. Formerly, it seems, it was a haunt of robbers and bandits, and it is a pity that the renowned Ki-Tsang did not live in those days. Perhaps he would have become a Genghis Khan?

Major Noltitz told me of a Turkoman saying to the following effect: "If you meet a Mervian and a viper, begin by killing the Mervian and leave the viper till afterwards."

I fancy it would be better to begin with killing the viper now that the Mervian has become a Russian.

We have seven hours to stop at Merv. I shall have time to visit this curious town. Its physical and moral transformation has been profound, owing to the somewhat arbitrary proceedings of the Russian administration. It is fortunate that its fortress, five miles round, built by Nour Verdy in 1873, was not strong enough to prevent its capture by the czar, so that the old nest of malefactors has become one of the most important cities of the Transcaspian.

I said to Major Noltitz:

"If it is not trespassing on your kindness, may I ask you to go with me?"

"Willingly," he answered; "and as far as I am concerned, I shall be very pleased to see Merv again."

We set out at a good pace.

"I ought to tell you," said the major, "that it is the new town we are going to see."

"And why not the old one first? That would be more logical and more chronological."

"Because old Merv is eighteen miles away, and you will hardly see it as you pass. So you must refer to the accurate description given of it by your great geographer Elisée Reclus."

And certainly readers will not lose anything by the change.

The distance from the station to new Merv is not great. But what an abominable dust! The commercial town is built on the left of the river--a town in the American style, which would please Ephrinnell, wide streets straight as a line crossing at right angles; straight boulevards with rows of trees; much bustle and movement among the merchants in Oriental costume, in Jewish costume, merchants of every kind; a number of camels and dromedaries, the latter much in request for their powers of withstanding fatigue and which differ in their hinder parts from their African congeners. Not many women along the sunny roads which seem white hot. Some of the feminine types are, however, sufficiently remarkable, dressed out in a quasi-military costume, wearing soft boots and a cartouche belt in the Circassian style. You must take care of the stray dogs, hungry brutes with long hair and disquieting fangs, of a breed reminding one of the dogs of the Caucasus, and these animals--according to Boulangier the engineer--have eaten a Russian general.

"Not entirely," replies the major, confirming the statement. "They left his boots."

In the commercial quarter, in the depths of the gloomy ground floors,

inhabited by the Persians and the Jews, within the miserable shops are sold carpets of incredible fineness, and colors artistically combined, woven mostly by old women without any Jacquard cards.

On both banks of the Mourgab the Russians have their military establishment. There parade the Turkoman soldiers in the service of the czar. They wear the blue cap and the white epaulettes with their ordinary uniform, and drill under the orders of Russian officers.

A wooden bridge, fifty yards long, crosses the river. It is practicable not only for foot-passengers, but for trains, and telegraph wires are stretched above its parapets.

On the opposite bank is the administrative town, which contains a considerable number of civil servants, wearing the usual Russian cap.

In reality the most interesting place to see is a sort of annexe, a Tekke village, in the middle of Merv, whose inhabitants have retained the villainous characteristics of this decaying race, the muscular bodies, large ears, thick lips, black beard. And this gives the last bit of local color to be found in the new town.

At a turning in the commercial quarter we met the commercials, American and English.

"Mr. Ephrinell," I said, "there is nothing curious in this modern Merv."

"On the contrary, Mr. Bombarnac, the town is almost Yankee, and it will soon see the day when the Russians will give it tramways and gaslights!"

"That will come!"

"I hope it will, and then Merv will have a right to call itself a city."

"For my part, I should have preferred a visit to the old town, with its mosque, its fortress, and its palace. But that is a little too far off, and the train does not stop there, which I regret."

"Pooh!" said the Yankee. "What I regret is, that there is no business to be done in these Turkoman countries! The men all have teeth--"

"And the women all have hair," added Horatia Bluett.

"Well, miss, buy their hair, and you will not lose your time."

"That is exactly what Holmes-Holme of London will do as soon as we have exhausted the capillary stock of the Celestial Empire."

And thereupon the pair left us.

I then suggested to Major Noltitz--it was six o'clock--to dine at Merv, before the departure of the train. He consented, but he was wrong to consent. An ill-fortune took us to the Hotel Slav, which is very inferior to our dining car--at least as regards its bill of fare. It

contained, in particular, a national soup called "borchtch," prepared with sour milk, which I would carefully refrain from recommending to the gourmets of the Twentieth Century.

With regard to my newspaper, and that telegram relative to the mandarin our train is "conveying" in the funereal acceptance of the word? Has Popof obtained from the mutes who are on guard the name of this high personage?

Yes, at last! And hardly are we within the station than he runs up to me, saying:

"I know the name."

"And it is?"

"Yen Lou, the great mandarin Yen Lou of Peking."

"Thank you, Popof."

I rush to the telegraph office, and from there I send a telegram to the Twentieth Century.

"Merv, 16th May, 7 p.m.

"Train, Grand Transasiatic, just leaving Merv. Took from Douchak the body of the great mandarin Yen Lou coming from Persia to Peking."

It cost a good deal, did this telegram, but you will admit it was well worth its price.

The name of Yen Lou was immediately communicated to our fellow travelers, and it seemed to me that my lord Faruskiar smiled when he heard it.

We left the station at eight o'clock precisely. Forty minutes afterwards we passed near old Merv, and the night being dark I could see nothing of it. There was, however, a fortress with square towers and a wall of some burned bricks, and ruined tombs, and a palace and remains of mosques, and a collection of archaeological things, which would have run to quite two hundred lines of small text.

"Console yourself," said Major Noltitz. "Your satisfaction could not be complete, for old Merv has been rebuilt four times. If you had seen the fourth town, Bairam Ali of the Persian period, you would not have seen the third, which was Mongol, still less the Musalman village of the second epoch, which was called Sultan Sandjar Kala, and still less the town of the first epoch. That was called by some Iskander Kala, in honor of Alexander the Macedonian, and by others Ghiaour Kala, attributing its foundation to Zoroaster, the founder of the Magian religion, a thousand years before Christ. So I should advise you to put your regrets in the waste-paper basket."

And that is what I did, as I could do no better with them.

Our train is running northeast. The stations are twenty or thirty versts apart. The names are not shouted, as we make no stop, and I have to discover them on my time-table. Such are Keltchi, Ravina--why this Italian name in this Turkoman province?--Peski, Repetek, etc. We cross the desert, the real desert without a thread of water, where artesian wells have to be sunk to supply the reservoirs along the line.

The major tells me that the engineers experienced immense difficulty in fixing the sandhills on this part of the railway. If the palisades had not been sloped obliquely, like the barbs of a feather, the line would have been covered by the sand to such an extent as to stop the running of the trains. As soon as this region of sandhills had been passed we were again on the level plain on which the rails had been laid so easily.

Gradually my companions go to sleep, and our carriage is transformed into a sleeping car.

I then return to my Roumanian. Ought I to attempt to see him to-night? Undoubtedly; and not only to satisfy a very natural curiosity, but also to calm his anxiety. In fact, knowing his secret is known to the person who spoke to him through the panel of his case, suppose the idea occurred to him to get out at one of the stations, give up his journey, and abandon his attempt to rejoin Mademoiselle Zinca Klork, so as to escape the company's pursuit? That is possible, after all, and my intervention may have done the poor fellow harm--to say nothing of my

losing No. 11, one of the most valuable in my collection.

I am resolved to visit him before the coming dawn. But, in order to be as careful as possible, I will wait until the train has passed Tchardjoui, where it ought to arrive at twenty-seven past two in the morning. There we shall stop a quarter of an hour before proceeding towards the Amu-Daria. Popof will then retire to his den, and I shall be able to slip into the van, without fear of being seen.

How long the hours appear! Several times I have almost fallen asleep, and twice or thrice I have had to go out into the fresh air on the platform.

The train enters Tchardjoui Station to the minute. It is an important town of the Khanate of Bokhara, which the Transcaspian reached towards the end of 1886, seventeen months after the first sleeper was laid. We are not more than twelve versts from the Amu-Daria, and beyond that river I shall enter on my adventure.

I have said that the stop at Tchardjoui ought to last a quarter of an hour. A few travelers alight, for they have booked to this town which contains about thirty thousand inhabitants. Others get in to proceed to Bokhara and Samarkand, but these are only second-class passengers. This produces a certain amount of bustle on the platform.

I also get out and take a walk up and down by the side of the front van, and I notice the door silently open and shut. A man creeps out on

to the platform and slips away through the station, which is dimly lighted by a few petroleum lamps.

It is my Roumanian. It can be no one else. He has not been seen, and there he is, lost among the other travelers. Why this escape? Is it to renew his provisions at the refreshment bar? On the contrary, is not his intention, as I am afraid it is, to get away from us?

Shall I stop him? I will make myself known to him; promise to help him. I will speak to him in French, in English, in German, in Russian--as he pleases. I will say to him: "My friend, trust to my discretion; I will not betray you. Provisions? I will bring them to you during the night. Encouragements? I will heap them on you as I will the refreshments. Do not forget that Mademoiselle Zinca Klork, evidently the most lovely of Roumanians, is expecting you at Pekin, etc."

Behold me then following him without appearing to do so. Amid all this hurry to and fro he is in little danger of being noticed. Neither Popof nor any of the company's servants would suspect him to be a swindler. Is he going towards the gate to escape me?

No! He only wants to stretch his legs better than he can do in the van. After an imprisonment which has lasted since he left Baku--that is to say, about sixty hours--he has earned ten minutes of freedom.

He is a man of middle height, lithe in his movements, and with a gliding kind of walk. He could roll himself up like a cat and find

quite room enough in his case. He wears an old vest, his trousers are held up by a belt, and his cap is a fur one--all of dark color.

I am at ease regarding his intentions. He returns towards the van, mounts the platform, and shuts the door gently behind him. As soon as the train is on the move I will knock at the panel, and this time--

More of the unexpected. Instead of waiting at Tchardjoui one-quarter of an hour we have to wait three. A slight injury to one of the brakes of the engine has had to be repaired, and, notwithstanding the German baron's remonstrances, we do not leave the station before half-past three, as the day is beginning to dawn.

It follows from this that if I cannot visit the van I shall at least see the Amou-Daria.

The Amou-Daria is the Oxus of the Ancients, the rival of the Indus and the Ganges. It used to be a tributary of the Caspian, as shown on the maps, but now it flows into the Sea of Aral. Fed by the snows and rains of the Pamir plateau, its sluggish waters flow between low clay cliffs and banks of sand. It is the River-Sea in the Turkoman tongue, and it is about two thousand five hundred kilometres long.

The train crosses it by a bridge a league long, the line being a hundred feet and more above its surface at low water, and the roadway trembles on the thousand piles which support it, grouped in fives between each of the spans, which are thirty feet wide.

In ten months, at a cost of thirty-five thousand roubles, General Annenkof built this bridge, the most important one on the Grand Transasiatic.

The river is of a dull-yellow color. A few islands emerge from the current here and there, as far as one can see.

Popof pointed out the stations for the guards on the parapet of the bridge.

"What are they for?" I asked.

"For the accommodation of a special staff, whose duty it is to give the alarm in case of fire, and who are provided with fire-extinguishers."

This is a wise precaution. Not only have sparks from the engines set it on fire in several places, but there are other disasters possible. A large number of boats, for the most part laden with petroleum, pass up and down the Amou-Daria, and it frequently happens that these become fire-ships. A constant watch is thus only too well justified, for if the bridge were destroyed, its reconstruction would take a year, during which the transport of passengers from one bank to the other would not be without its difficulties.

At last the train is going slowly across the bridge. It is broad daylight. The desert begins again at the second station, that of

Karakoul. Beyond can be seen the windings of an affluent of the Amou-Daria, the Zarafchane, "the river that rolls with gold," the course of which extends up to the valley of the Sogd, in that fertile oasis on which stands the city of Samarkand.

At five o'clock in the morning the train stops at the capital of the Khanate of Bokhara, eleven hundred and seven versts from Uzun Ada.