

CHAPTER XIII.

We dined an hour after the train left. In the dining car were several newcomers, among others two negroes whom Caterna began to speak of as darkies.

None of these travelers, Popof told me, would cross the Russo-Chinese frontier, so that they interested me little or not at all.

During dinner, at which all my numbers were present--I have twelve now, and I do not suppose I shall go beyond that--I noticed that Major Noltitz continued to keep his eye on his lordship Faruskiar. Had he begun to suspect him? Was it of any importance in his opinion that this Mongol seemed to know, without appearing to do so, the three second-class travelers, who were also Mongols? Was his imagination working with the same activity as mine, and was he taking seriously what was only a joke on my part? That I, a man of letters, a chronicler in search of scenes and incidents, should be pleased to see in his personage a rival of the famous Ki Tsang, or Ki Tsang himself, could be understood; but that he, a serious man, doctor in the Russian army, should abandon himself to such speculations no one would believe. Never mind now, we shall have something more to say about it by and by.

As for me, I had soon forgotten all about the Mongol for the man in the case. Tired as I am after that long run through Samarkand, if I get a

chance to visit him to-night I will.

Dinner being over, we all begin to make ourselves comfortable for the night, with the intention of sleeping till we reach Tachkend.

The distance from Samarkand to Tachkend is three hundred kilometres. The train will not get in there before seven o'clock in the morning. It will stop three times at small stations for water and fuel--circumstances favorable to the success of my project. I add that the night is dark, the sky overcast, no moon, no stars. It threatens rain; the wind is freshening. It is no time for walking on platforms, and nobody walks there. It is important to choose the moment when Popof is sound asleep.

It is not necessary for the interview to be a long one. That the gallant fellow should be reassured--that is the essential point--and he will be, as soon as I have made his acquaintance. A little information concerning him, concerning Mademoiselle Zinca Klork, whence he comes, why he is going to Peking, why he chose such a mode of transport, his provisions for the journey, how he gets into the case, his age, his trade, his birthplace, what he has done in the past, what he hopes to do in the future, etc., etc., and I have done all that a conscientious reporter can do. That is what I want to know; that is what I will ask him. It is not so very much.

And in the first place let us wait until the car is asleep. That will not be long, for my companions are more or less fatigued by the hours they have spent in Samarkand. The beds were ready immediately after

dinner. A few of the passengers tried a smoke on the platform, but the gust drove them in very quickly. They have all taken up their places under the curtained lamps, and toward half-past ten the respiration of some and the snoring of others are blended with the continued grinding of the train on the steel rails.

I remained outside last of all, and Popof exchanged a few words with me.

"We shall not be disturbed to-night," he said to me, "and I would advise you to make the most of it. To-morrow night we shall be running through the defiles of the Pamir, and we shall not travel so quietly, I am afraid."

"Thanks, Popof, I will take your advice, and sleep like a marmot."

Popof wished me good night and went into his cabin.

I saw no use in going back into the car, and remained on the platform. It was impossible to see anything either to the left or right of the line. The oasis of Samarkand had already been passed, and the rails were now laid across a long horizontal plain. Many hours would elapse before the train reached the Syr Daria, over which the line passes by a bridge like that over the Amou-Daria, but of less importance.

It was about half-past eleven when I decided to open the door of the van, which I shut behind me.

I knew that the young Roumanian was not always shut up in his box, and the fancy might just have taken him to stretch his limbs by walking from one end to the other of the van.

The darkness is complete. No jet of light filters through the holes of the case. That seems all the better for me. It is as well that my No. 11 should not be surprised by too sudden an apparition. He is doubtless asleep. I will give two little knocks on the panel, I will awake him, and we will explain matters before he can move.

I feel as I go. My hand touches the case; I place my ear against the panel and I listen.

There is not a stir, not a breath! Is my man not here? Has he got away? Has he slipped out at one of the stations without my seeing him? Has my news gone with him? Really, I am most uneasy; I listen attentively.

No! He has not gone. He is in the case. I hear distinctly his regular and prolonged respiration. He sleeps. He sleeps the sleep of the innocent, to which he has no right, for he ought to sleep the sleep of the swindler of the Grand Transasiatic.

I am just going to knock when the locomotive's whistle emits its strident crow, as we pass through a station. But the train is not going to stop, I know, and I wait until the whistling has ceased.

I then give a gentle knock on the panel.

There is no reply.

However, the sound of breathing is not so marked as before.

I knock more loudly.

This time it is followed by an involuntary movement of surprise and fright.

"Open, open!" I say in Russian.

There is no reply.

"Open!" I say again. "It is a friend who speaks. You have nothing to fear!"

If the panel is not lowered, as I had hoped, there is the crack of a match being lighted and a feeble light appears in the case.

I look at the prisoner through the holes in the side.

There is a look of alarm on his face; his eyes are haggard. He does not know whether he is asleep or awake.

"Open, my friend, I say, open and have confidence. I have discovered your secret. I shall say nothing about it. On the other hand, I may be

of use to you."

The poor man looks more at ease, although he does not move.

"You are a Roumanian, I think," I add, "and I am a Frenchman."

"Frenchman? You are a Frenchman?"

And this reply was given in my own language, with a foreign accent.

One more bond between us.

The panel slips along its groove, and by the light of a little lamp I can examine my No. 11, to whom I shall be able to give a less arithmetical designation.

"No one can see us, nor hear us?" he asked in a half-stifled voice.

"No one."

"The guard?"

"Asleep."

My new friend takes my hands, he clasps them. I feel that he seeks a support. He understands he can depend on me. And he murmurs:

"Do not betray me--do not betray me."

"Betray you, my boy? Did not the French newspapers sympathize with that little Austrian tailor, with those two Spanish sweethearts, who sent themselves by train in the way you are doing? Were not subscriptions opened in their favor? And can you believe that I, a journalist--"

"You are a journalist?"

"Claudius Bombarnac, special correspondent of the Twentieth Century."

"A French journal--"

"Yes, I tell you."

"And you are going to Pekin?"

"Through to Pekin."

"Ah! Monsieur Bombarnac, Providence has sent you onto my road."

"No, it was the managers of my journal, and they delegated to me the powers they hold from Providence, courage and confidence. Anything I can do for you I will."

"Thanks, thanks."

"What is your name?"

"Kinko."

"Kinko? Excellent name!"

"Excellent?"

"For my articles! You are a Roumanian, are you not?"

"Roumanian of Bucharest."

"But you have lived in France?"

"Four years in Paris, where I was apprentice to an upholsterer in the Faubourg Saint Antoine."

"And you went back to Bucharest?"

"Yes, to work at my trade there until the day came when it was impossible for me to resist the desire to leave--"

"To leave? Why?"

"To marry!"

"To marry--Mademoiselle Zinca--"

"Zinca?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle Zinca Klork, Avenue Cha-Coua, Pekin, China!"

"You know?"

"Certainly. The address is on the box."

"True."

"As to Mademoiselle Zinca Klork--"

"She is a young Roumanian. I knew her in Paris, where she was learning the trade of a milliner. Oh, charming--"

"I am sure upon it. You need not dwell on that."

"She also returned to Bucharest, until she was invited to take the management of a dressmaker's at Pekin. We loved, monsieur; she went--and we were separated for a year. Three weeks ago she wrote to me. She was getting on over there. If I could go out to her, I would do well. We should get married without delay. She had saved something. I would soon earn as much as she had. And here I am on the road--in my turn--for China."

"In this box?"

"What would you have, Monsieur Bombarnac?" asked Kinko, reddening. "I had only money enough to buy a packing case, a few provisions, and get myself sent off by an obliging friend. It costs a thousand francs to go from Tiflis to Peking. But as soon as I have gained them, the company will be repaid, I assure you."

"I believe you, Kinko, I believe you; and on your arrival at Peking?"

"Zinca has been informed. The box will be taken to Avenue Cha-Coua, and she--"

"Will pay the carriage?"

"Yes."

"And with pleasure, I will answer for it."

"You may be sure of it, for we love each other so much."

"And besides, Kinko, what would one not do for a sweetheart who consents to shut himself up in a box for a fortnight, and arrives labelled 'Glass,' 'Fragile,' 'Beware of damp--'"

"Ah, you are making fun of a poor fellow."

"Not at all; and you may rest assured I will neglect nothing which will

enable you to arrive dry and in one piece at Mademoiselle Zinca Klork's--in short, in a perfect state of preservation!"

"Again I thank you," said Kinko, pressing my hands. "Believe me, you will not find me ungrateful."

"Ah! friend Kinko, I shall be paid, and more than paid!"

"And how?"

"By relating, as soon as I can do so without danger to you, the particulars of your journey from Tiflis to Peking. Think now--what a heading for a column:

'A LOVER IN A BOX!

ZINCA AND KINKO!!

1,500 LEAGUES THROUGH CENTRAL ASIA IN A
LUGGAGE VAN!!!!"

The young Roumanian could not help smiling.

"You need not be in too much of a hurry!" he said.

"Never fear! Prudence and discretion, as they say at the matrimonial agencies."

Then I went to the door of the van to see that we were in no danger of

surprise, and then the conversation was resumed. Naturally, Kinko asked me how I had discovered his secret. I told him all that had passed on the steamer during the voyage across the Caspian. His breathing had betrayed him. The idea that at first I took him for a wild beast seemed to amuse him. A wild beast! A faithful poodle, rather! Then with a sneeze he went up the animal scale to human rank.

"But," said he to me, lowering his voice, "two nights ago I thought all was lost. The van was closed. I had just lighted my little lamp, and had begun my supper when a knock came against the panel--"

"I did that, Kinko, I did that. And that night we should have become acquainted if the train had not run into a dromedary."

"It was you! I breathe again!" said Kinko. "In what dreams I have lived! It was known that some one was hidden in this box. I saw myself discovered, handed over to the police, taken to prison at Merv or Bokhara, and my little Zinca waiting for me in vain; and never should I see her again, unless I resumed the journey on foot. Well, I would have resumed, yes, I would."

And he said it with such an air of resolution that it was impossible not to see that the young Roumanian had unusual spirit.

"Brave Kinko!" I answered. "I am awfully sorry to have caused you such apprehensions. Now you are at ease again, and I fancy your chances have improved now we have made friends."

I then asked Kinko to show me how he managed in his box.

Nothing could be simpler or better arranged. At the bottom was a seat on which he sat with the necessary space for him to stretch his legs when he placed them obliquely; under the seat, shut in by a lid, were a few provisions, and table utensils reduced to a simple pocket knife and metal mug; an overcoat and a rug hung from a nail, and the little lamp he used at nighttime was hooked onto one of the walls.

The sliding panel allowed the prisoner to leave his prison occasionally. But if the case had been placed among other packages, if the porters had not deposited it with the precautions due to its fragility, he would not have been able to work the panel, and would have had to make a friend somehow before the end of the journey. Fortunately, there is a special Providence for lovers, and divine intervention in favor of Kinko and Zinca Klork was manifested in all its plenitude. He told me that very night he had taken a walk either in the van or else on the station platform where the train had stopped.

"I know that, Kinko. That was at Bokhara. I saw you!"

"You saw me?"

"Yes, and I thought you were trying to get away. But if I saw you, it was because I knew of your presence in the van, and I was there watching you, no one else having an idea of spying on you.

Nevertheless, it was dangerous; do not do it again; let me replenish your larder when I get an opportunity."

"Thank you, Monsieur Bombarnac, thank you! I do not believe I am in danger of being discovered, unless at the Chinese frontier--or rather at Kachgar."

"And why?"

"The custom house is very keen on goods going into China. I am afraid they will come round the packages, and that my box--"

"In fact, Kinko," I replied, "there are a few difficult hours for you."

"If they find me out?"

"I shall be there, and I will do all I can to prevent anything unpleasant happening."

"Ah! Monsieur Bombarnac!" exclaimed Kinko, in a burst of gratitude.

"How can I repay you?"

"Very easily, Kinko."

"And in what way?"

"Ask me to your marriage with the lovely Zinca."

"I will! And Zinca will embrace you."

"She will be only doing her duty, friend Kinko, and I shall be only doing mine in returning two kisses for one."

We exchanged a last grip of the hand; and, really, I think there were tears in the good fellow's eyes when I left him. He put out his lamp, he pushed back the panel, then through the case I heard one more "thanks" and an "au revoir."

I came out of the van, I shut the door, I assured myself that Popof was still asleep. In a few minutes, after a breath or two of the night air, I go into my place near Major Noltitz.

And before I close my eyes my last thought is that, thanks to the appearance of the episodic Kinko, the journey of their energetic "Special" will not be displeasing to my readers.