

CHAPTER XIV.

In 1870 the Russians endeavored without success to establish a fair at Tachkend which would rival that at Nijni-Novgorod. Some twenty years later the attempt would have succeeded, and as a matter of fact the fair now exists, owing to the making of the Transcaspian to unite Samarkand and Tachkend.

And now not only do merchants with their merchandise crowd into this town, but pilgrims with their pilgrimage outfits. And there will be quite a procession, or rather an exodus, when the time comes for the Mussulman faithful to ride to Mecca by railway.

Meanwhile we are at Tachkend, and the time-table shows that we stop here two hours and a half.

Of course I shall not have time to visit the town, which would be worth my while to do. But I must confess that these cities of Turkestan are very much alike, and to have seen one is to have seen another, unless we can go into details.

Crossing a fertile region where poplars like distaffs rise gracefully erect, skirting fields bristling with vines, running by gardens where fruit trees abound, our train stops at the new town.

As is inevitable since the Russian conquest, there are two towns side by side at Tachkend as at Samarkand, as at Bokhara, as at Merv. Here the old town has tortuous streets, houses of mud and clay, bazaars of poor appearance, caravanserais built of bricks dried in the sun, a few mosques, and schools as numerous as if the czar had decreed by ukase that everything French should be imitated. It is true that the scholars are wanting, but there is no want of schools.

The population of Tachkend does not differ very much from that met with in other parts of Turkestan. It comprises Sarthes, Usbegs, Tadjiks, Khirgizes, Nogais, Israelites, a few Afghans and Hindoos and--as may be naturally supposed--a fair supply of Russians.

It is perhaps at Tachkend that the Jews are gathered in the greatest numbers. And from the day that the town passed under Russian administration their situation has considerably improved. From that epoch dates the complete civil and political liberty they now enjoy.

I have only two hours to spare in visiting the town, and I do my work in true reporter style. You should have seen me dashing through the grand bazaar, a mere wooden building, which is crammed with Oriental stuffs, silk goods, metal ware, specimens of Chinese manufacture, including some very fine examples of porcelain.

In the streets of old Tachkend a certain number of women are to be met with. I need hardly say that there are no slaves in this country, much to the displeasure of the Mussulmans. Nowadays woman is free--even in

her household.

"An old Turkoman," said Major Noltitz, "once told me that a husband's power is at an end now that he cannot thrash his wife without being threatened with an appeal to the czar; and that marriage is at an end!"

I do not know if the fair sex is still beaten, but the husbands know what they may expect if they knock their wives about. Will it be believed that these peculiar Orientals can see no progress in this prohibition to beat their wives? Perhaps they remember that the Terrestrial Paradise is not far off--a beautiful garden between the Tigris and Euphrates, unless it was between the Amou and the Syr-Daria. Perhaps they have not forgotten that mother Eve lived in this preadamite garden, and that if she had been thrashed a little before her first fault, she would probably not have committed it. But we need not enlarge on that.

I did not hear, as Madam Ujfalvy-Bourdon did, the band playing the *Pompier*s de Nanterre in the governor-general's garden. No! On this occasion they were playing *Le Pere la Victoire*, and if these are not national airs they are none the less agreeable to French ears.

We left Tachkend at precisely eleven o'clock in the morning. The country through which the Grand Transasiatic is now running is not so monotonous. The plain begins to undulate, for we are approaching the outer ramifications of the eastern orographic system. We are nearing the tableland of the Pamirs. At the same time we continue at normal

speed along this section of a hundred and fifty kilometres which separates us from Khodjend.

As soon as we are on the move I begin to think of Kinko. His little love romance has touched me to the heart. This sweetheart who sent himself off--this other sweetheart who is going to pay the expenses--I am sure Major Noltitz would be interested in these two turtle doves, one of which is in a cage; he would not be too hard on this defrauder of the company, he would be incapable of betraying him. Consequently I have a great desire to tell him of my expedition into the baggage van. But the secret is not mine. I must do nothing that might get Kinko into trouble.

And so I am silent, and to-night I will, if possible, take a few provisions to my packing case--to my snail in his shell, let us say. And is not the young Roumanian like a snail in his shell, for it is as much as he can do to get out of it?

We reach Khodjend about three in the afternoon. The country is fertile, green, carefully cultivated. It is a succession of kitchen gardens, which seem to be well-kept immense fields sown with clover, which yield four or five crops a year. The roads near the town are bordered with long rows of mulberry trees, which diversify the view with eccentric branches.

Again, this pair of cities, old and new. Both of them had only thirty thousand inhabitants in 1868 and they have from forty-five to fifty

thousand now. Is it the influence of the surroundings which produces the increase of the birth rate? Is the province affected by the prolific example of the Celestial Empire? No! It is the progress of trade, the concentration of merchants of all nations onto these new markets.

Our halt at Khodjend has lasted three hours. I have made my professional visit and walked on the banks of the Syr-Dana. This river, which bathes the foot of the high mountains of Mogol-Taou, is crossed by a bridge, the middle section of which gives passage to ships of moderate tonnage.

The weather is very warm. The town being protected by its shelter of mountains, the breezes of the steppe cannot reach it, and it is one of the hottest places in Turkestan.

I met the Caternas, delighted with their excursion. The actor said to me in a tone of the best humor:

"Never shall I forget Khodjend, Monsieur Claudius."

"And why will you never forget Khodjend, Monsieur Caterna?"

"Do you see these peaches?" he asked, showing me the fruit he was carrying.

"They are magnificent--"

"And not dear! A kilo for four kopeks--that is to say, twelve centimes!"

"Eh!" I answer. "That shows that peaches are rather common in this country. That is the Asiatic apple and it was one of those apples that Mrs. Adam took a bite at--"

"Then I excuse her!" said Madame Caterna, munching away at one of these delicious peaches.

After leaving Tachkend the railway had curved toward the south, so as to reach Khodjend; but after leaving town it curved to the east in the direction of Kokhan. It is at Tachkend that it is nearest to the Transsiberian, and a branch line is being made to Semipalatinsk to unite the railway systems of Central and Northern Asia.

Beyond we shall run due east, and by Marghelan and Och pass through the gorges of the Pamirs so as to reach the Turkesto-Chinese frontier.

The train had only just started when the travelers took their seats at the table, where I failed to notice any fresh arrival. We shall not pick up any more until we reach Kachgar. There the Russian cookery will give place to the Chinese, and although the name does not recall the nectar and ambrosia of Olympus, it is probable that we shall not lose by the change.

Ephrinell is in his usual place. Without going as far as familiarity,

it is obvious that a close intimacy, founded on a similarity in tastes and aptitudes exists between Miss Horatia Bluett and the Yankee. There is no doubt, in our opinion, but what it will end in a wedding as soon as the train arrives. Both will have their romance of the rail. Frankly, I like that of Kinko and Zinca Klork much better. It is true the pretty Roumanian is not here!

We are all very friendly, and by "we" I mean my most sympathetic numbers, the major, the Caternas, young Pan Chao, who replies with very Parisian pleasantries to the actor's fooleries.

The dinner is a pleasant one and a good one. We learn what is the fourth rule formulated by Cornaco, that Venetian noble, and with the object of determining the right amount for drinking and eating. Pan Chao pressed the doctor on this subject, and Tio-King replied, with a seriousness truly buddhic:

"The rule is founded on the quantity of nourishment proportionate for each temperament as regards the difference of ages, and the strength and the food of various kinds."

"And for your temperament, doctor?" asked Caterna, "what is the right quantity?"

"Fourteen ounces of solid or liquid--"

"An hour?"

"No, sir, a day," replied Tio-King. "And it was in this manner that the illustrious Cornaro lived from the age of thirty-six, so as to leave himself enough strength of body and mind to write his fourth treatise when he was eighty-five, and to live to a hundred and two."

"In that case, give me my fifth cutlet," said Pan Ghao, with a burst of laughter.

There is nothing more agreeable than to talk before a well-served table; but I must not forget to complete my notes regarding Kokham. We were not due there till nine o'clock, and that would be in the nighttime. And so I asked the major to give me some information regarding this town, which is the last of any importance in Russian Turkestan.

"I know it all the better," said the major, "from having been in garrison there for fifteen months. It is a pity you have not time to visit it, for it remains very Asiatic, and there has not been time yet for it to grow a modern town. There is a square there unrivalled in Asia, a palace in great style, that of the old Khan of Khondajar, situated on a mound about a hundred yards high, and in which the governor has left his Sarthe artillery. It is considered wonderful, and there is good reason for it. You will lose by not going there a rare opportunity of bringing in the high-flown words of your language in description: the reception hall transformed into a Russian church, a labyrinth of rooms with the floors of the precious Karagatch wood, the

rose pavilion, in which visitors receive a truly Oriental hospitality, the interior court of Moorish decoration recalling the adorable architectural fancies of the Alhambra, the terraces with their splendid views, the harem where the thousand wives of the Sultan--a hundred more than Solomon--live in peace together, the lacework of the fronts, the gardens with their shady walks under the ancient vines--that is what you would have seen--"

"And which I have already seen with your eyes, dear major," said I. "My readers will not complain. Pray tell me if there are any bazaars in ."

"A Turkestan town without bazaars would be like London without its docks."

"And Paris without its theaters!" said the actor.

"Yes; there are bazaars at Kokhan, one of them on the Sokh bridge, the two arms of which traverse the town and in it the finest fabrics of Asia are sold for tillahs of gold, which are worth three roubles and sixty kopeks of our money."

"I am sure, major, that you are going to mention mosques after bazaars."

"Certainly."

"And medresses?"

"Certainly; but you must understand that some of them are as good as the mosques and medresses of Samarkand of Bokhara."

I took advantage of the kindness of Major Noltitz and thanks to him, the readers of the Twentieth Century need not spend a night in Kokhan. I will leave my pen inundated with the solar rays of this city of which I could only see a vague outline.

The dinner lasted till rather late, and terminated in an unexpected manner by an offer from Caterna to recite a monologue.

I need scarcely say that the offer was gladly accepted.

Our train more and more resembled a small rolling town It had even its casino, this dining-car in which we were gathered at the moment. And it was thus in the eastern part of Turkestan, four hundred kilometres from the Pamir plateau, at dessert after our excellent dinner served in a saloon of the Grand Transasiatic, that the Obsession was given with remarkable talent by Monsieur Caterna, grand premier comique, engaged at Shanghai theater for the approaching season.

"Monsieur," said Pan Chao, "my sincere compliments. I have heard young Coquelin--"

"A master, monsieur; a master!" said Caterna.

"Whom you approach--"

"Respectfully--very respectfully!"

The bravos lavished on Caterna had no effect on Sir Francis Trevelyan, who had been occupying himself with onomatopoeic exclamations regarding the dinner, which he considered execrable. He was not amused--not even sadly, as his countrymen have been for four hundred years, according to Froissart. And yet nobody took any notice of this grumbling gentleman's recriminations.

Baron Weisschnitzerdörfer had not understood a single word of this little masterpiece, and had he understood it, he would not have been able to appreciate this sample of Parisian monologomania.

As to my lord Faruskiar and his inseparable Ghangir, it seemed that in spite of their traditional reserve, the surprising grimaces, the significant gestures, the comical intonations, had interested them to a certain extent.

The actor had noticed it, and appreciated this silent admiration.

As he rose from the table he said to me:

"He is magnificent, this seigneur! What dignity! What a presence! What a type of the farthest East! I like his companion less--a third-rate fellow at the outside! But this superb Mongol! Caroline, cannot you imagine him as 'Morales' in the Pirates of the Savannah?"

"Not in that costume, at any rate," said I.

"Why not, Monsieur Claudius? One day at Perpignan I played 'Colonel de Montéclin' in the Closerie des Genets in the costume of a Japanese officer--"

"And he was applauded!" added Madame Caterna.

During dinner the train had passed Kastakos station, situated in the center of a mountainous region. The road curved a good deal, and ran over viaducts and through tunnels--as we could tell by the noise.

A little time afterward Popof told us that we were in the territory of Ferganah, the name of the ancient khanate of Kokhan, which was annexed by Russia in 1876, with the seven districts that compose it. These districts, in which Sarthes are in the majority, are administered by prefects, sub-prefects, and mayors. Come, then, to Ferganah, to find all the machinery of the constitution of the year VIII.

Beyond there is an immense steppe, extending before our train. Madame de Ujfalvy-Bourdon has justly compared it to a billiard table, so perfect in its horizontality. Only it is not an ivory ball which is rolling over its surface, but an express of the Grand Transasiatic running at sixty kilometres an hour.

Leaving the station of Tchontchai behind, we enter station at nine

o'clock in the evening. The stoppage is to last two hours. We get out onto the platform.

As we are leaving the car I am near Major Noltitz, who asks young Pan Chao:

"Have you ever heard of this mandarin Yen Lou, whose body is being taken to Peking?"

"Never, major."

"But he ought to be a personage of consideration, to be treated with the honor he gets."

"That is possible," said Pan Chao; "but we have so many personages of consideration in the Celestial Empire."

"And so, this mandarin, Yen Lou?"

"I never heard him mentioned."

Why did Major Noltitz ask the Chinaman this question? What was he thinking about?