

## CHAPTER XV.

Kokhan, two hours to stop. It is night. The majority of the travelers have already taken up their sleeping quarters in the car, and do not care to alight.

Here am I on the platform, walking the deck as I smoke. This is rather an important station, and from the engine house comes a more powerful locomotive than those which have brought the train along since we left Uzun Ada. These early engines were all very well as long as the line lay over an almost horizontal plain. But now we are among the gorges of the Pamir plateau, there are gradients of such steepness as to require more engine power.

I watch the proceedings, and when the locomotive has been detached with its tender, the baggage van--with Kinko in--is at the head of the train.

The idea occurs to me that the young Roumanian may perhaps venture out on the platform. It would be an imprudence for he runs the risk of being seen by the police, the "gardovois," who move about taking a good look at the passengers. What my No. 11 had better do is to remain in his box, or at least in his van. I will go and get a few provisions, liquid and solid, and take them to him, even before the departure of the train, if it is possible to do so without fear of being noticed.

The refreshment room at the station is open, and Popof is not there. If he was to see me making purchases he would be astonished, as the dining car contains everything we might want.

At the bar I get a little cold meat, some bread, and a bottle of vodka.

The station is not well lighted. A few lamps give only a feeble light. Popof is busy with one of the railway men. The new engine has not yet been attached to the train. The moment seems favorable. It is useless to wait until we have left. If I can reach Kinko I shall be able to sleep through the night--and that will be welcome, I admit.

I step onto the train, and after assuring myself that no one is watching me, I enter the baggage van, saying as I do so:

"It is I."

In fact it is as well to warn Kinko in case he is out of his box.

But he had not thought of getting out, and I advise him to be very careful.

He is very pleased at the provisions, for they are a change to his usual diet.

"I do not know how to thank you, Monsieur Bombarnac," he says to me.

"If you do not know, friend Kinko," I reply, "do not do it; that is very simple."

"How long do we stop at ?"

"Two hours."

"And when shall we be at the frontier?"

"To-morrow, about one in the afternoon."

"And at Kachgar?"

"Fifteen hours afterward, in the night of the nineteenth."

"There the danger is, Monsieur Bombarnac."

"Yes, Kinko; for if it is difficult to enter the Russian possessions, it is no less difficult to get out of them, when the Chinese are at the gates. Their officials will give us a good look over before they will let us pass. At the same time they examine the passengers much more closely than they do their baggage. And as this van is reserved for the luggage going through to Peking, I do not think you have much to fear. So good night. As a matter of precaution, I would rather not prolong my visit."

"Good night, Monsieur Bombarnac, good night."

I have come out, I have regained my couch, and I really did not hear the starting signal when the train began to move.

The only station of any importance which the railway passed before sunrise, was that of Marghelan, where the stoppage was a short one.

Marghelan, a populous town--sixty thousand inhabitants--is the real capital of Ferganah. That is owing to the fact that it does not enjoy a good reputation for salubrity. It is of course, a double town, one town Russian, the other Turkoman. The latter has no ancient monuments, and no curiosities, and my readers must pardon my not having interrupted my sleep to give them a glance at it.

Following the valley of Schakhimardan, the train has reached a sort of steppe and been able to resume its normal speed.

At three o'clock in the morning we halt for forty-five minutes at Och station.

There I failed in my duty as a reporter, and I saw nothing. My excuse is that there was nothing to see.

Beyond this station the road reaches the frontier which divides Russian Turkestan from the Pamir plateau and the vast territory of the Kara-Khirghizes.

This part of Central Asia is continually being troubled by Plutonian disturbances beneath its surface. Northern Turkestan has frequently suffered from earthquake--the terrible experience of 1887 will not have been forgotten--and at Tachkend, as at Samarkand, I saw the traces of these commotions. In fact, minor oscillations are continually being observed, and this volcanic action takes place all along the fault, where lay the stores of petroleum and naphtha, from the Caspian Sea to the Pamir plateau.

In short, this region is one of the most interesting parts of Central Asia that a tourist can visit. If Major Noltitz had never been beyond Och station, at the foot of the plateau, he knew the district from having studied it on the modern maps and in the most recent books of travels. Among these I would mention those of Capus and Bonvalot--again two French names I am happy to salute out of France. The major is, nevertheless, anxious to see the country for himself, and although it is not yet six o'clock in the morning, we are both out on the gangway, glasses in hand, maps under our eyes.

The Pamir, or Bam-i-Douniah, is commonly called the "Roof of the World." From it radiate the mighty chains of the Thian Shan, of the Kuen Lun, of the Kara Korum, of the Himalaya, of the Hindoo Koosh. This orographic system, four hundred kilometres across, which remained for so many years an impassable barrier, has been surmounted by Russian tenacity. The Slav race and the Yellow race have come into contact.

We may as well have a little book learning on the subject; but it is

not I that speak, but Major Noltitz.

The travelers of the Aryan people have all attempted to explore the plateau of the Pamir. Without going back to Marco Polo in the thirteenth century, what do we find? The English with Forsyth, Douglas, Biddulph, Younghusband, and the celebrated Gordon who died on the Upper Nile; the Russians with Fendchenko, Skobeleff, Prjevalsky, Grombtchevsky, General Pevtzoff, Prince Galitzin, the brothers Groum-Grjimailo; the French with Auvergne, Bonvalot, Capus, Papin, Breteuil, Blanc, Ridgway, O'Connor, Dutreuil de Rhins, Joseph Martin, Grenard, Edouard Blanc; the Swedes with Doctor Swen-Hedin.

This Roof of the World, one would say that some devil on two sticks had lifted it up in his magic hand to let us see its mysteries. We know now that it consists of an inextricable entanglement of valleys, the mean altitude of which exceeds three thousand metres; we know that it is dominated by the peaks of Gouroumdi and Kauffmann, twenty-two thousand feet high, and the peak of Tagarma, which is twenty-seven thousand feet; we know that it sends off to the west the Oxus and the Amou Daria, and to the east the Tarim; we know that it chiefly consists of primary rocks, in which are patches of schist and quartz, red sands of secondary age, and the clayey, sandy loess of the quaternary period which is so abundant in Central Asia.

The difficulties the Grand Transasiatic had in crossing this plateau were extraordinary. It was a challenge from the genius of man to nature, and the victory remained with genius. Through the gently

sloping passes which the Kirghizes call "bels," viaducts, bridges, embankments, cuttings, tunnels had to be made to carry the line. Here are sharp curves, gradients which require the most powerful locomotives, here and there stationary engines to haul up the train with cables, in a word, a herculean labor, superior to the works of the American engineers in the defiles of the Sierra Nevada and the Rocky Mountains.

The desolate aspect of these territories makes a deep impression on the imagination. As the train gains the higher altitudes, this impression is all the more vivid. There are no towns, no villages--nothing but a few scattered huts, in which the Pamirian lives a solitary existence with his family, his horses, his herds of yaks, or "koutars," which are cattle with horses' tails, his diminutive sheep, his thick-haired goats. The moulting of these animals, if we may so phrase it, is a natural consequence of the climate, and they change the dressing gown of winter for the white fur coat of summer. It is the same with the dog, whose coat becomes whiter in the hot season.

As the passes are ascended, wide breaks in the ranges yield frequent glimpses of the more distant portions of the plateau. In many places are clumps of birches and junipers, which are the principal trees of the Pamir, and on the undulating plains grow tamarisks and sedges and mugwort, and a sort of reed very abundant by the sides of the saline pools, and a dwarf labiate called "terskenne" by the Kirghizes.

The major mentioned certain animals which constitute a somewhat varied

fauna on the heights of the Pamir. It is even necessary to keep an eye on the platforms of the cars in case a stray panther or bear might seek a ride without any right to travel either first or second class. During the day our companions were on the lookout from both ends of the cars. What shouts arose when plantigrades or felines capered along the line with intentions that certainly seemed suspicious! A few revolver shots were discharged, without much necessity perhaps, but they amused as well as reassured the travelers. In the afternoon we were witnesses of a magnificent shot, which killed instantly an enormous panther just as he was landing on the side step of the third carriage.

"It is thine, Marguerite!" exclaimed Caterna. And could he have better expressed his admiration than in appropriating the celebrated reply of Buridan to the Dauphine's wife--and not the queen of France, as is wrongly stated in the famous drama of the Tour de Nesle?

It was our superb Mongol to whom we were indebted for this marksman's masterpiece.

"What a hand and what an eye!" said I to the major, who continued to look on Faruskiar with suspicion.

Among the other animals of the Pamirian fauna appeared wolves and foxes, and flocks of those large wild sheep with gnarled and gracefully curved horns, which are known to the natives as arkars. High in the sky flew the vultures, bearded and unbearded, and amid the clouds of white vapor we left behind us were many crows and pigeons and turtledoves and

wagtails.

The day passed without adventure. At six o'clock in the evening we crossed the frontier, after a run of nearly two thousand three hundred kilometres, accomplished in four days since leaving Uzun Ada. Two hundred and fifty kilometres beyond we shall be at Kachgar. Although we are now in Chinese Turkestan, it will not be till we reach that town that we shall have our first experience of Chinese administration.

Dinner over about nine o'clock, we stretched ourselves on our beds, in the hope, or rather the conviction, that the night will be as calm as the preceding one.

It was not to be so.

At first the train was running down the slopes of the Pamir at great speed. Then it resumed its normal rate along the level.

It was about one in the morning when I was suddenly awakened.

At the same time Major Noltitz and most of our companions jumped up.

There were loud shouts in the rear of the train.

What had happened?

Anxiety seized upon the travelers--that confused, unreasonable anxiety

caused by the slightest incident on a railroad.

"What is the matter? What is the matter?"

These words were uttered in alarm from all sides and in different languages.

My first thought was that we were attacked. I thought of the famous Ki-Tsang, the Mongol pirate, whose help I had so imprudently called upon--for my chronicle.

In a moment the train began to slow, evidently preparing to stop.

Popof came into the van, and I asked him what had happened.

"An accident," he replied.

"Serious?"

"No, a coupling has broken, and the two last vans are left behind."

As soon as the train pulls up, a dozen travelers, of whom I am one, get out onto the track.

By the light of the lantern it is easy to see that the breakage is not due to malevolence. But it is none the less true that the two last vans, the mortuary van and the rear van occupied by the goods guard,

are missing. How far off are they? Nobody knows.

You should have heard the shouts of the Persian guards engaged in escorting the remains of Yen Lou, for which they were responsible! The travelers in their van, like themselves, had not noticed when the coupling broke. It might be an hour, two hours, since the accident.

What ought to be done was clear enough. The train must be run backward and pick up the lost vans.

Nothing could be more simple. But--and this surprised me--the behavior of my lord Faruskiar seemed very strange. He insisted in the most pressing manner that not a moment should be lost. He spoke to Popof, to the driver, to the stoker, and for the first time I discovered that he spoke Russian remarkably well.

There was no room for discussion. We were all agreed on the necessity of a retrograde movement.

Only the German baron protested. More delays! A waste of time for the sake of a mandarin--and a dead mandarin!

He had to walk about and bear it. As to Sir Francis Trevellyan, he merely shrugged his shoulders, as much as to say: "What management! What couplings! We should not get this sort of thing on an Anglo-Indian line!"

Major Noltitz was as much struck as I was at the behavior of my lord Faruskiar. This Mongol, usually so calm, so impassible, with his cool look beneath his motionless eyelid, had become a prey to a sort of furious anxiety which he appeared incapable of controlling. His companion was as excited as he was. But what was there in these two missing vans which could be of interest to them? They had not even any luggage in the rear van! Was it the mandarin, Yen Lou? Was it for that reason that at Donchak they had so carefully watched the van which contained the corpse? I could see clearly enough that the major thought it all very suspicious.

The train began to run back as soon as we had taken our places. The German baron attempted to curse, but Faruskiar gave him such a look that he did not care to get another, and stowed himself away in the corner.

Dawn appeared in the east when the two wagons were found a kilometre off, and the train gently slowed up to them after an hour's run.

Faruskiar and Ghangir went to help in coupling on the vans, which was done as firmly as possible. Major Noltitz and I noticed that they exchanged a few words with the other Mongols. After all, there was nothing astonishing in that, for they were countrymen of theirs.

We resume our seats in the train, and the engineer tries to make up for lost time.

Nevertheless, the train does not arrive at Kachgar without a long delay, and it is half-past four in the morning when we enter the capital of Chinese Turkestan.

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