

CHAPTER XVII.

We are off on a Chinese railway, single line, the train drawn by a Chinese engine, driven by a Chinese driver. Let us hope we shall not be telescoped on the road, for among the passengers is one of the chief functionaries of the company in the person of Faruskiar.

After all, if an accident should happen it will break the monotony of the journey, and furnish me with an episode. I am forced to admit that up to the present my personages have not behaved as I expected. The drama does not run well, the action languishes. We want something startling to bring all the actors on--what Caterna would call "a good fourth act."

But then Ephrinell and Miss Bluett are all the time absorbed in their commercial tête-à-tête. Pan Chao and the doctor amused me for a time, but they are not equal to it now. The actor and the actress are of no use without opportunity. Kinko, Kinko himself, on whom I had built such hopes, has passed the frontier without difficulty, he will reach Peking, he will marry Zinca Klork. Decidedly there is a want of excitement. I cannot get anything out of the corpse of Yen Lou! and the readers of the Twentieth Century who looked to me for something sensational and thrilling.

Must I have recourse to the German baron? No! he is merely ridiculous,

stupidly ridiculous, and he has no interest for me.

I return to my idea: I want a hero, and up to the present no hero has appeared on the scene.

Evidently the moment has come to enter into more intimate relations with Faruskiar. Perhaps he will not now be so close in his incognito. We are under his orders, so to say. He is the mayor of our rolling town, and a mayor owes something to those he governs. Besides, in the event of Kinko's fraud being discovered I may as well secure the protection of this high functionary.

Our train runs at only moderate speed since we left Kachgar. On the opposite horizon we can see the high lands of the Pamir; to the southwest rises the Bolor, the Kachgarian belt from which towers the summit of Tagharma lost among the clouds.

I do not know how to spend my time. Major Noltitz has never visited the territories crossed by the Grand Transasiatic, and I am deprived of the pleasure of taking notes from his dictation. Dr. Tio-King does not lift his nose from his Cornaro, and Pan Chao reminds me more of Paris and France than of Peking and China; besides, when he came to Europe he came by Suez, and he knows no more of Oriental Turkestan than he does of Kamtschatka. All the same, we talk. He is a pleasant companion, but a little less amiability and a little more originality would suit me better.

I am reduced to strolling from one car to another, lounging on the platforms, interrogating the horizon, which obstinately refuses to reply, listening on all sides.

Hello! there are the actor and his wife apparently in animated conversation. I approach. They sing in an undertone. I listen.

"I'm fond of my turkeys--eys--eys," says Madame Caterna.

"I'm fond of my wethers--ers--ers," says Monsieur Caterna, in any number of baritones.

It is the everlasting duet between Pipo and Bettina; and they are rehearsing for Shanghai. Happy Shanghai! They do not yet know the Mascotte!

Ephrinell and Miss Bluett are talking away with unusual animation, and I catch the end of the dialogue.

"I am afraid," said she, "that hair will be rising in Pekin--"

"And I," said he, "that teeth will be down. Ah! If a good war would only break out in which the Russians would give the Chinaman a smack on the jaw."

There now! Smack them on the jaw, in order that Strong, Bulbul & Co., of New York, might have a chance of doing a trade!

Really I do not know what to do, and we have a week's journey before us. To Jericho with the Grand Transasiatic and its monotonous security! The Great Trunk from New York to San Francisco has more life in it! At least, the redskins do sometimes attack the trains, and the chance of a scalping on the road cannot but add to the charm of the voyage!

But what is that I hear being recited, or rather intoned at the end of our compartment?

"There is no man, whoever he may be, who cannot prevent himself from eating too much, and avoid the evils due to repletion. On those who are intrusted with the direction of public affairs this is more incumbent than on others--"

It is Dr. Tio-King reading Cornaro aloud, in order that he may remember his principles better. Eh! after all, this principle is not to be despised. Shall I send it by telegram to our cabinet ministers? They might, perhaps, dine with more discretion after it.

During this afternoon I find by the guide-book that we shall cross the Yamanyar over a wooden bridge. This stream descends from the mountains to the west, which are at least twenty-five thousand feet high, and its rapidity is increased by the melting of the snows. Sometimes the train runs through thick jungles, amid which Popof assures me tigers are numerous. Numerous they may be, but I have not seen one. And yet in default of redskins we might get some excitement out of tiger-skins.

What a heading for a newspaper, and what a stroke of luck for a journalist! TERRIBLE CATASTROPHE. A GRAND TRANSASIATIC EXPRESS ATTACKED BY TIGERS. FIFTY VICTIMS. AN INFANT DEVoured BEFORE ITS MOTHER'S EYES--the whole thickly leaded and appropriately displayed.

Well, no! The Turkoman felidae did not give me even that satisfaction! And I treat them--as I treat any other harmless cats.

The two principal stations have been Yanghi-Hissar, where the train stops ten minutes, and Kizil, where it stops a quarter of an hour. Several blast furnaces are at work here, the soil being ferruginous, as is shown by the word "Kizil," which means red.

The country is fertile and well cultivated, growing wheat, maize, rice, barley and flax, in its eastern districts. Everywhere are great masses of trees, willows, mulberries, poplars. As far as the eye can reach are fields under culture, irrigated by numerous canals, also green fields in which are flocks of sheep; a country half Normandy, half Provence, were it not for the mountains of the Pamir on the horizon. But this portion of Kachgaria was terribly ravaged by war when its people were struggling for independence. The land flowed with blood, and along by the railway the ground is dotted with tumuli beneath which are buried the victims of their patriotism. But I did not come to Central Asia to travel as if I were in France! Novelty! Novelty! The unforeseen! The appalling!

It was without the shadow of an accident, and after a particularly fine run, that we entered Yarkand station at four o'clock in the afternoon.

If Yarkand is not the administrative capital of eastern Turkestan, it is certainly the most important commercial city of the province.

"Again two towns together," said I to Major Noltitz. "That I have from Popof."

"But this time," said the major, "it was not the Russians who built the new one."

"New or old," I added, "I am afraid is like the others we have seen, a wall of earth, a few dozen gateways cut in the wall, no monuments or buildings of note, and the eternal bazaars of the East."

I was not mistaken, and it did not take four hours to visit both Yarkands, the newer of which is called Yanji-Shahr.

Fortunately, the Yarkand women are not forbidden to appear in the streets, which are bordered by simple mud huts, as they were at the time of the "dadkwahs," or governors of the province. They can give themselves the pleasure of seeing and being seen, and this pleasure is shared in by the farangis--as they call foreigners, no matter to what nation they may belong. They are very pretty, these Asiatics, with their long tresses, their transversely striped bodices, their skirts of bright colors, relieved by Chinese designs in Kothan silk, their

high-heeled embroidered boots, their turbans of coquettish pattern, beneath which appear their black hair and their eyebrows united by a bar.

A few Chinese passengers alighted at Yarkand, and gave place to others exactly like them--among others a score of coolies--and we started again at eight o'clock in the evening.

During the night we ran the three hundred and fifty kilometres which separate Yarkand from Kothan.

A visit I paid to the front van showed me that the box was still in the same place. A certain snoring proved that Kinko was inside as usual, and sleeping peacefully. I did not care to wake him, and I left him to dream of his adorable Roumanian.

In the morning Popof told me that the train, which was now traveling about as fast as an omnibus, had passed Kargalik, the junction for the Kilian and Tong branches. The night had been cold, for we are still at an altitude of twelve hundred metres. Leaving Guma station, the line runs due east and west, following the thirty-seventh parallel, the same which traverses in Europe, Seville, Syracuse and Athens.

We sighted only one stream of importance, the Kara-kash, on which appeared a few drifting rafts, and files of horses and asses at the fords between the pebbly banks. The railroad crosses it about a hundred kilometres from Khotan, where we arrived at eight o'clock in the

morning.

Two hours to stop, and as the town may give me a foretaste of the cities of China, I resolve to take a run through it.

It seems to be a Turkoman town built by the Chinese, or perhaps a Chinese town built by Turkomans. Monuments and inhabitants betray their double origin. The mosques look like pagodas, the pagodas look like mosques.

And I was not astonished when the Caternas, who would not miss this opportunity of setting foot in China, were rather disappointed.

"Monsieur Claudius," said the actor to me, "there is not a single scene here that would suit the *Prise de Pékin!*"

"But we are not at Peking, my dear Caterna."

"That is true, and it has to be remembered, if we are to be thankful for little."

"'Thankful for very little,' as the Italians say."

"Well, if they say that, they are no fools."

As we were about to board the car again, I saw Popof running toward me, shouting:

"Monsieur Bombarnac!"

"What is the matter, Popof?"

"A telegraph messenger asked me if there was any one belonging to the Twentieth Century in the train."

"A telegraph messenger?"

"Yes, on my replying in the affirmative, he gave me this telegram for you."

"Give it me! give it me!"

I seize the telegram, which has been waiting for me for some days. Is it a reply to my wire sent from Merv, relative to the mandarin Yen Lou?

I open it. I read it. And it falls from my hand.

This is what it said:

"Claudius Bombarnac,

"Correspondent,

"Twentieth Century.

"Khotan, Chinese Turkestan.

"It is not the corpse of a mandarin that the train
is taking to Peking, but the imperial treasure,
value fifteen millions, sent from Persia to China,
as announced in the Paris newspapers eight days
ago; endeavor to be better informed for the future."

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