

CHAPTER XVIII.

"Millions--there are millions in that pretended mortuary van!"

In spite of myself, this imprudent phrase had escaped me in such a way that the secret of the imperial treasure was instantly known to all, to the railway men as well as to the passengers. And so, for greater security, the Persian government, in agreement with the Chinese government, has allowed it to be believed that we were carrying the corpse of a mandarin, when we were really taking to Peking a treasure worth fifteen million of francs.

Heaven pardon me, what a howler--pardonable assuredly--but what a howler I had been guilty of! But why should I have doubted what Popof told me, and why should Popof have suspected what the Persians had told him regarding this Yen Lou? There was no reason for our doubting their veracity.

I am none the less deeply humiliated in my self-esteem as a journalist, and I am much annoyed at the call to order which I have brought upon myself. I shall take very good care not to breathe a word of my misadventure, even to the major. Is it credible? In Paris the Twentieth Century is better informed of what concerns the Grand Transasiatic than I am! They knew that an imperial treasure is in the van, and I did not! Oh! the mistakes of special correspondents!

Now the secret is divulged, and we know that this treasure, composed of gold and precious stones, formerly deposited in the hands of the Shah of Persia, is being sent to its legitimate owner, the Son of Heaven.

That is why my lord Faruskiar, who was aware of it in consequence of his position as general manager of the company, had joined the train at Douchak so as to accompany the treasure to its destination. That is why he and Ghangir--and the three other Mongols--had so carefully watched this precious van, and why they had shown themselves so anxious when it had been left behind by the breakage of the coupling, and why they were so eager for its recovery. Yes, all is explained!

That is also why a detachment of Chinese soldiers has taken over the van at Kachgar, in relief of the Persians! That is why Pan-Chao never heard of Yen Lou, nor of any exalted personage of that name existing in the Celestial Empire!

We started to time, and, as may be supposed, our traveling companions could talk of nothing else but the millions which were enough to enrich every one in the train.

"This pretended mortuary van has always been suspicious to me," said Major Noltitz. "And that was why I questioned Pan-Chao regarding the dead mandarin."

"I remember," I said; "and I could not quite understand the motive of

your question. It is certain now that we have got a treasure in tow."

"And I add," said the major, "that the Chinese government has done wisely in sending an escort of twenty well-armed men. From Kothan to Lan Teheou the trains will have two thousand kilometres to traverse through the desert, and the safety of the line is not as great as it might be across the Gobi."

"All the more so, major, as the redoubtable Ki-Tsang has been reported in the northern provinces."

"Quite so, and a haul of fifteen millions is worth having by a bandit chief."

"But how could the chief be informed of the treasure being sent?"

"That sort of people always know what it is their interest to know."

"Yes," thought I, "although they do not read the Twentieth Century."

Meanwhile different opinions were being exchanged on the gangways. Some would rather travel with the millions than carry a corpse along with them, even though it was that of a first-class mandarin. Others considered the carrying of the treasure a danger to the passengers. And that was the opinion of Baron Weisschnitzerdörfer in a furious attack on Popof.

"You ought to have told us about it, sir, you ought to have told us about it! Those millions are known to be in the train, and they will tempt people to attack us. And an attack, even if repulsed, will mean delay, and delay I will not submit to! No, sir, I will not!"

"No one will attack us," replied Popof. "No one will dream of doing it!"

"And how do you know that? how do you know that?"

"Be calm, pray."

"I will not be calm; and if there is a delay, I will hold the company responsible!"

That is understood; a hundred thousand florins damages to Monsieur le Baron Tour de Monde.

Let us pass to the other passengers.

Ephrinell looked at the matter, of course, from a very practical point of view.

"There can be no doubt that our risks have been greatly increased by this treasure, and in case of accident on account of it, the Life Travelers' Society, in which I am insured, will, I expect, refuse to pay, so that the Grand Transasiatic Company will have all the responsibility."

"Of course," said Miss Bluett; "and if they had not found the missing van the company would have been in a serious difficulty with China. Would it not, Fulk?"

"Exactly, Horatia!"

Horatia and Fulk--nothing less.

The Anglo-American couple were right, the enormous loss would have had to be borne by the Grand Transasiatic, for the company must have known they were carrying a treasure and not a corpse--and thereby they were responsible.

As to the Caternas, the millions rolling behind did not seem to trouble them. The only reflection they inspired was, "Ah! Caroline, what a splendid theater we might build with all that money!"

But the best thing was said by the Reverend Nathaniel Morse, who had joined the train at Kachgar.

"It is never comfortable to be dragging a powder magazine after one!"

Nothing could be truer, and this van with its imperial treasure was a powder magazine that might blow up our train.

The first railway was opened in China about 1877 and ran from Shanghai

to Fou-Tcheou. The Grand Transasiatic followed very closely the Russian road proposed in 1874 by Tachkend, Kouldja, Kami, Lan Tcheou, Singan and Shanghai. This railway did not run through the populous central provinces which can be compared to vast and humming hives of bees--and extraordinarily prolific bees. As before curving off to Lan Tcheou; it reaches the great cities by the branches it gives out to the south and southeast. Among others, one of these branches, that from Tai Youan to Nanking, should have put these two towns of the Chan-Si and Chen-Toong provinces into communication. But at present the branch is not ready for opening, owing to an important viaduct not having finished building.

The completed portion gives me direct communication across Central Asia. That is the main line of the Transasiatic. The engineers did not find it so difficult of construction as General Annenkof did the Transcaspian. The deserts of Kara Koum and Gobi are very much alike; the same dead level, the same absence of elevations and depressions, the same suitability for the iron road. If the engineers had had to attack the enormous chain of the Kuen Lun, Nan Chan, Amie, Gangar Oola, which forms the frontier of Tibet, the obstacles would have been such that it would have taken a century to surmount them. But on a flat, sandy plain the railway could be rapidly pushed on up to Lan Tcheou, like a long Decauville of three thousand kilometres.

It is only in the vicinity of this city that the art of the engineer has had a serious struggle with nature in the costly and troublesome road through the provinces of Kan-Sou, Chan-Si and Petchili.

As we go along I must mention a few of the principal stations at which the train stops to take in coal and water. On the right-hand side the eye never tires of the distant horizon of mountains which bounds the tableland of Tibet to the north. On the left the view is over the interminable steppes of the Gobi. The combination of these territories constitutes the Chinese Empire if not China proper, and we shall only reach that when we are in the neighborhood of Lan Tcheou.

It would seem, therefore, as though the second part of the journey would be rather uninteresting, unless we are favored with a few startling incidents. But it seems to me that we are certainly in the possession of the elements out of which something journalistic can be made.

At eleven o'clock the train left Kothan station, and it was nearly two o'clock in the afternoon when it reached Keria, having left behind the small stations of Urang, Langar, Pola and Tschiria.

In 1889-90 this road was followed by Pevtsoff from Kothan to Lob-Nor at the foot of the Kuen Lun, which divides Chinese Turkestan from Tibet. The Russian traveler went by Keria, Nia, Tchertchen, as we are doing so easily, but then his caravan had to contend with much danger and difficulty--which did not prevent his reporting ten thousand kilometres of surveys, without reckoning altitude and longitude observations of the geographical points. It is an honor for the Russian government to have thus continued the work of Prjevalsky.

From Keria station you can see to the southwest the heights of Kara Korum and the peak of Dapsang, to which different geographers assign a height of eight thousand metres. At its foot extends the province of Kachmir. There the Indus rises in a number of inconsiderable sources which feed one of the greatest rivers of the Peninsula. Thence from the Pamir tableland extends the mighty range of the Himalaya, where rise the highest summits on the face of the globe.

Since we left Kothan we have covered a hundred and fifty kilometres in four hours. It is not a high rate of speed, but we cannot expect on this part of the Transasiatic the same rate of traveling we experienced on the Transcaspian. Either the Chinese engines are not so fast, or, thanks to their natural indolence, the engine drivers imagine that from thirty to forty miles an hour is the maximum that can be obtained on the railways of the Celestial Empire.

At five o'clock in the afternoon we were at another station, Nia, where General Pevtsoff established a meteorological observatory. Here we stopped only twenty minutes. I had time to lay in a few provisions at the bar. For whom they were intended you can imagine.

The passengers we picked up were only Chinese, men and women. There were only a few for the first class, and these only went short journeys.

We had not started a quarter of an hour when Ephrinell, with the sferious manner of a merchant intent on some business, came up to me on the gangway.

"Monsieur Bombarnac," he said, "I have to ask a favor of you."

Eh! I thought, this Yankee knows where to find me when he wants me.

"Only too happy, I can assure you," said I. "What is it about?"

"I want you to be a witness--"

"An affair of honor? And with whom, if you please?"

"Miss Horatia Bluett."

"You are going to fight Miss Bluett!" I exclaimed, with a laugh.

"Not yet. I am going to marry her."

"Marry her?"

"Yes! a treasure of a woman, well acquainted with business matters, holding a splendid commission--"

"My compliments, Mr. Ephrinell! You can count on me--"

"And probably on M. Caterna?"

"He would like nothing better, and if there is a wedding breakfast he

will sing at your dessert--"

"As much as he pleases," replied the American. "And now for Miss Bluett's witnesses."

"Quite so."

"Do you think Major Noltitz would consent?"

"A Russian is too gallant to refuse. I will ask him, if you like."

"Thank you in advance. As to the second witness, I am rather in a difficulty. This Englishman, Sir Francis Trevellyan--"

"A shake of the head is all you will get from him."

"Baron Weisschnitzerdörfer?"

"Ask that of a man who is doing a tour of the globe, and who would never get through a signature of a name of that length!"

"Then I can only think of Pan-Chao, unless we try Popof--"

"Either would do it with pleasure. But there is no hurry, Mr. Ephrinell, and when you get to Peking you will have no difficulty in finding a fourth witness."

"What! to Pekin? It is not at Pekin that I hope to marry Miss Bluett!"

"Where, then? At Sou Tcheou or Lan Tcheou, while we stop a few hours?"

"Wait a bit, Monsieur Bombarnac! Can a Yankee wait?"

"Then it is to be--"

"Here."

"In the train?"

"In the train."

"Then it is for me to say, Wait a bit!"

"Not twenty-four hours."

"But to be married you require--"

"An American minister, and we have the Reverend Nathaniel Morse."

"He consents?"

"As if he would not! He would marry the whole train if it asked him!"

"Bravo, Mr. Ephrinell! A wedding in a train will be delightful."

"We should never put off until to-morrow what we can do to-day."

"Yes, I know, time is money."

"No! Time is time, simply, and I do not care to lose a minute of it."

Ephrinell clasped my hand, and as I had promised, I went to take the necessary steps regarding the witnesses necessary for the nuptial ceremonial.

It needs not be said that the commercials were of full age and free to dispose of themselves, to enter into marriage before a clergyman, as is done in America, and without any of the fastidious preliminaries required in France and other formalistic countries. Is this an advantage or otherwise? The Americans think it is for the best, and, as Cooper says, the best at home is the best everywhere.

I first asked Major Noltitz, who willingly agreed to be Miss Bluett's witness.

"These Yankees are astonishing," he said to me.

"Precisely because they are astonished at nothing, major."

I made a similar proposition to Pan-Chao.

"Delighted, Monsieur Bombarnac," he replied. "I will be the witness of this adorable and adored Miss Bluett! If a wedding between an Englishwoman and an American, with French, Russian and Chinese witnesses, does not offer every guarantee of happiness, where are we likely to meet with it?"

And now for Caterna.

The actor would have consented for any number of weddings.

"What a notion for a vaudeville or an operetta!" he exclaimed. "We have the Mariage au tambour, the Mariage aux olives, the Mariage aux lanternes--well, this will be the Mariage en railway, or the Marriage by Steam! Good titles, all those, Monsieur Claudius! Your Yankee can reckon on me! Witness old or young, noble father or first lover, marquis or peasant, as you like, I am equal to it--"

"Be natural, please," said I. "It will have a good effect, considering the scenery."

"Is Madame Caterna to come to the wedding?"

"Why not--as bridesmaid!"

In all that concerns the traditional functions we must have no difficulties on the Grand Transasiatic.

It is too late for the ceremony to take place to-day. Ephrinell understood that certain conventionalities must be complied with. The celebration could take place in the morning. The passengers could all be invited, and Faruskiar might be prevailed on to honor the affair with his presence.

During dinner we talked of nothing else. After congratulating the happy couple, who replied with true Anglo-Saxon grace, we all promised to sign the marriage contract.

"And we will do honor to your signatures," said Ephrinell, in the tone of a tradesman accepting a bill.

The night came, and we retired, to dream of the marriage festivities of the morrow. I took my usual stroll into the car occupied by the Chinese soldiers, and found the treasure of the Son of Heaven faithfully guarded. Half the detachment were awake and half were asleep.

About one o'clock in the morning I visited Kinko, and handed him over my purchases at Nia. The young Roumanian was in high spirits. He anticipated no further obstacles, he would reach port safely, after all.

"I am getting quite fat in this box," he told me.

I told him about the Ephrinell-Bluett marriage, and how the union was to be celebrated next morning with great pomp.

"Ah!" said he, with a sigh. "They are not obliged to wait until they reach Pekin!"

"Quite so, Kinko; but it seems to me that a marriage under such conditions is not likely to be lasting! But after all, that is the couple's lookout."

At three o'clock in the morning we stopped forty minutes at Tchertchen, almost at the foot of the ramifications of the Kuen Lun. None of us had seen this miserable, desolate country, treeless and verdureless, which the railway was now crossing on its road to the northeast.

Day came; our train ran the four hundred kilometres between Tchertchen and Tcharkalyk, while the sun caressed with its rays the immense plain, glittering in its saline efflorescences.