

CHAPTER XIX.

When I awoke I seemed to have had an unpleasant dream. A dream in no way like those we interpret by the Clef d'Or. No! Nothing could be clearer. The bandit chief Ki Tsang had prepared a scheme for the seizure of the Chinese treasure; he had attacked the train in the plains of Gobi; the car is assaulted, pillaged, ransacked; the gold and precious stones, to the value of fifteen millions, are torn from the grasp of the Celestials, who yield after a courageous defence. As to the passengers, another two minutes of sleep would have settled their fate--and mine.

But all that disappeared with the vapors of the night. Dreams are not fixed photographs; they fade in the sun, and end by effacing themselves.

In taking my stroll through the train as a good townsman takes his stroll through the town, I am joined by Major Noltitz. After shaking hands, he showed me a Mongol in the second-class car, and said to me, "That is not one of those we picked up at Douchak when we picked up Faruskiar and Ghangir."

"That is so," said I; "I never saw that face in the train before."

Popof, to whom I applied for information, told me that the Mongol had got in at Tchertchen. "When he arrived," he said, "the manager spoke to

him for a minute, from which I concluded that he also was one of the staff of the Grand Transasiatic."

I had not noticed Faruskiar during my walk. Had he alighted at one of the small stations between Tchertchen and Tcharkalyk, where we ought to have been about one o'clock in the afternoon?

No, he and Ghangir were on the gangway in front of our car. They seemed to be in animated conversation, and only stopped to take a good look toward the northeastern horizon. Had the Mongol brought some news which had made them throw off their usual reserve and gravity? And I abandoned myself to my imagination, foreseeing adventures, attacks of bandits, and so on, according to my dream.

I was recalled to reality by the Reverend Nathaniel Morse, who said to me, "It is fixed for to-day, at nine o'clock; do not forget."

That meant the marriage of Fulk Ephrinell and Horatia Bluett. Really, I was not thinking of it. It is time for me to go and dress for the occasion. All I can do will be to change my shirt. It is enough that one of the husband's witnesses should be presentable; the other, Caterna, will be sure to be magnificent!

In fact, the actor had gone into the luggage van--how I trembled for Kinko!--and there, with Popof's assistance, had got out of one of his boxes a somewhat free-and-easy costume, but one certain of success at a wedding: A primrose coat with metal buttons, and a buttonhole, a sham

diamond pin in the cravat, poppy-colored breeches, copper buckles, flowered waistcoat, clouded stockings, thread gloves, black pumps, and white beaver hat. What a number of bridegrooms and uncles of bridegrooms our friend had been in this traditional attire! He looked superb, with his beaming face, his close-shaven chin, and blue cheeks, and his laughing eyes and rosy lips.

Madame Caterna was quite as glorious in her array. She had easily discovered a bridesmaid's costume in her wardrobe, bodice with intercrossing stripes, short petticoat in green woolen, mauve stockings, straw hat with artificial flowers, a suspicion of black on the eyelids and of rouge on the cheeks. There you have the provincial stage beauty, and if she and her husband like to play a village piece after the breakfast, I can promise them bravos enough.

It was at nine o'clock that this marriage was to take place, announced by the bell of the tender, which was to sound full clang as if it were a chapel bell. With a little imagination, we could believe we were in a village. But whither did this bell invite the witnesses and guests? Into the dining car, which had been conveniently arranged for the ceremony, as I had taken good care.

It was no longer a dining car; it was a hall car, if the expression is admissible. The big table had been taken away, and replaced by a small table which served as a desk. A few flowers bought at Tchertchen had been arranged in the corners of the car, which was large enough to hold nearly all who wished to be present--and those who could not get inside

could look on from the gangways.

That all the passengers might know what was going on, we had put up a notice at the doors of the first and second-class cars, couched in the following terms:

"Mr. Fulk Ephrinell, of the firm of Messrs. Strong, Bulbul & Co., of New York City, has the honor to invite you to his wedding with Miss Horatia Bluett, of the firm of Messrs. Holmes-Holme, London, which will take place in the dining car on this the 22d of May, at nine o'clock precisely. The Reverend Nathaniel Morse, of Boston, U.S.A., will officiate.

"Miss Horatia Bluett, of the firm of Messrs. Holmes-Holme, of London, has the honor to invite you to her wedding with Mr. Fulk Ephrinell, of the firm of Messrs. Strong, Bulbul & Co., of New York City, etc., etc."

If I do not make half a dozen pars out of all this I am no newspaper man!

Meanwhile I learn from Popof the precise spot where the ceremony will take place.

Popof points it out on the map. It is a hundred and fifty kilometres from Tcharkalyk station, in the middle of the desert, amid the plains which are traversed by a little stream which flows into the Lob Nor. For twenty leagues there is no station, and the ceremony is not likely

to be interrupted by any stoppage.

It need hardly be said that at half-past eight I and Caterna were ready for the call.

Major Noltitz and Pan-Chao had got themselves up in all due form for the solemnity. The major looked as serious as a surgeon who was going to cut off a leg. The Chinaman looked as gay as a Parisian at a village bridal.

Doctor Tio-King and Cornaro, one carrying the other, were to be at this little festivity. The noble Venetian was a bachelor, if I am not mistaken, but I do not think he gives any opinion on marriage, at least I have no recollection of its being in the chapter headed "Safe and easy means of promptly remedying the different accidents that threaten life."

"And," added Pan-Chao, who has just quoted this Cornarian phrase, "I suppose marriage ought to be included among those accidents!"

A quarter to nine. No one has yet seen the happy couple. Miss Bluett is in one of the toilet cabinets in the first van, where she is probably preparing herself. Fulk Ephrinell is perhaps struggling with his cravat and giving a last polish to his portable jewelry. I am not anxious. We shall see them as soon as the bell rings.

I have but one regret, and that is that Faruskiar and Ghangir should be

too busy to join us. Why do they continue to look out over the immense desert? Before their eyes there stretches not the cultivated steppe of the Lob Nor region, but the Gobi, which is barren, desolate and gloomy, according to the reports of Grjmailo, Blanc and Martin. It may be asked why these people are keeping such an obstinate lookout.

"If my presentiments do not deceive me," said Major Noltitz, "there is some reason for it."

What does he mean? But the bell of the tender, the tender bell, begins its joyous appeal. Nine o'clock; it is time to go into the dining car.

Caterna comes near me, and I hear him singing:

"It is the turret bell,
Which sud-denly is sounding."

While Madame Caterna replies to the trio of the Dame Blanche by the refrain of the Dragons de Villars:

"And it sounds, sounds, sounds,
It sounds and resounds--"

The passengers move in a procession, the four witnesses first, then the guests from the end of the village--I mean of the train; Chinese, Turkomans, Tartars, men and women, all curious to assist at the ceremony. The four Mongols remain on the last gangway near the treasure

which the Chinese soldiers do not leave for an instant.

We reach the dining car.

The clergyman is seated at the little table, on which is the certificate of marriage he has prepared according to the customary form. He looks as though he was accustomed to this sort of thing, which is as much commercial as matrimonial.

The bride and bridegroom have not appeared.

"Ah!" said I to the actor, "perhaps they have changed their minds."

"If they have," said Caterna, laughing, "the reverend gentleman can marry me and my wife over again. We are in wedding garments, and it is a pity to have had all this fuss for nothing, isn't it, Caroline?"

"Yes, Adolphe--"

But this pleasing second edition of the wedding of the Caternas did not come off. Here is Mr. Fulk Ephrinell, dressed this morning just as he was dressed yesterday--and--detail to note--with a pencil behind the lobe of his left ear, for he has just been making out an account for his New York house.

Here is Miss Horatia Bluett, as thin, as dry, as plain as ever, her dust cloak over her traveling gown, and in place of jewelry a noisy

bunch of keys, which hangs from her belt.

The company politely rise as the bride and bridegroom enter. They "mark time," as Caterna says. Then they advance toward the clergyman, who is standing with his hand resting on a Bible, open probably at the place where Isaac, the son of Abraham, espouses Rebecca, the daughter of Rachel.

We might fancy we were in a chapel if we only had a harmonium.

And the music is here! If it is not a harmonium, it is the next thing to it. An accordion makes itself heard in Caterna's hands. As an ancient mariner, he knows how to manipulate this instrument of torture, and here he is swinging out the andante from Norma with the most accordionesque expression.

It seems to give great pleasure to the natives of Central Asia. Never have their ears been charmed by the antiquated melody that the pneumatic apparatus was rendering so expressively.

But everything must end in this world, even the andante from Norma. and the Reverend Nathaniel Morse began to favor the young couple with the speech which had clone duty many times before under similar circumstances. "The two souls that blend together--Flesh of my flesh--Increase and multiply--"

In my opinion he had much better have got to work like a notary:

"Before us, there has been drawn up a deed of arrangement regarding Messrs. Ephrinell, Bluett & Co.--"

My thought remained unfinished. There are shouts from the engine. The brakes are suddenly applied with a scream and a grind. Successive shocks accompany the stoppage of the train. Then, with a violent bump, the cars pull up in a cloud of sand.

What an interruption to the nuptial ceremony!

Everything is upset in the dining car, men, furniture, bride, bridegroom and witnesses. Not one kept his equilibrium. It is an indescribable pell-mell, with cries of terror and prolonged groans. But I hasten to point out that there was nothing serious, for the stoppage was not all at once.

"Quick!" said the major. "Out of the train!"

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