

## CHAPTER XX.

In a moment the passengers, more or less bruised and alarmed, were out on the track. Nothing but complaints and questions uttered in three or four different languages, amid general bewilderment.

Faruskiar, Ghangir and the four Mongols were the first to jump off the cars. They are out on the line, kandijar in one hand, revolver in the other. No doubt an attack has been organized to pillage the train.

The rails have been taken up for about a hundred yards, and the engine, after bumping over the sleepers, has come to a standstill in a sandhill.

"What! The railroad not finished--and they sold me a through ticket from Tiflis to Pekin? And I came by this Transasiatic to save nine days in my trip round the world!"

In these phrases, in German, hurled at Popof, I recognized the voice of the irascible baron. But this time he should have addressed his reproaches not to the engineers of the company, but to others.

We spoke to Popof, while Major Noltitz continued to watch Faruskiar and the Mongols.

"The baron is mistaken," said Popof, "the railway is completed, and if

a hundred yards of rails have been lifted here, it has been with some criminal intention."

"To stop the train!" I exclaim.

"And steal the treasure they are sending to Peking!" says Caterna.

"There is no doubt about that," says Popof. "Be ready to repulse an attack."

"Is it Ki-Tsang and his gang that we have to do with?" I asked.

Ki-Tsang! The name spread among the passengers and caused inexpressible terror.

The major said to me in a low voice: "Why Ki-Tsang? Why not my lord Faruskiar?"

"He--the manager of the Transasiatic?"

"If it is true that the company had to take several of these robber chiefs into its confidence to assure the safety of the trains--"

"I will never believe that, major."

"As you please, Monsieur Bombarnac. But assuredly Faruskiar knew that this pretended mortuary van contained millions."

"Come, major, this is no time for joking."

No, it was the time for defending, and defending one's self courageously.

The Chinese officer has placed his men around the treasure van. They are twenty in number, and the rest of the passengers, not counting the women, amount to thirty. Popof distributes the weapons which are carried in case of attack. Major Noltitz, Caterna, Pan-Chao, Ephrinell, driver and stoker, passengers, Asiatic and European, all resolve to fight for the common safety.

On the right of the line, about a hundred yards away, stretches a deep, gloomy thicket, a sort of jungle, in which doubtless are hidden the robbers, awaiting the signal to pounce upon us.

Suddenly there is a burst of shouting, the thicket has given passage to the gang in ambush--some sixty Mongols, nomads of the Gobi. If these rascals beat us, the train will be pillaged, the treasure of the Son of Heaven will be stolen, and, what concerns us more intimately, the passengers will be massacred without mercy.

And Faruskiar, whom Major Noltitz so unjustly suspected? I look at him. His face is no longer the same; his fine features have become pale, his height has increased, there is lightning in his eyes.

Well! If I was mistaken about the mandarin Yen Lou, at least I had not mistaken the general manager of the Transasiatic or the famous bandit of Yunnan.

However, as soon as the Mongols appeared, Popof hurried Madame Caterna, Miss Horatia Bluett, and the other women into the cars. We took every means for putting them in safety.

My only weapon was a six-shot revolver, and I knew how to use it.

Ah! I wanted incidents and accidents, and impressions of the journey!

Well, the chronicler will not fail to chronicle, on condition that he emerges safe and sound from the fray, for the honor of reporting in general and the glory of the Twentieth Century in particular.

But is it not possible to spread trouble among the assailants, by beginning with blowing out Ki-Tsang's brains, if Ki-Tsang is the author of this ambushade? That would bring matters to a crisis.

The bandits fire a volley, and begin brandishing their arms and shouting. Faruskiar, pistol in one hand, kandijar in the other, has rushed onto them, his eyes gleaming, his lips covered with a slight foam. Ghangir is at his side, followed by four Mongols whom he is exciting by word and gesture.

Major Noltitz and I throw ourselves into the midst of our assailants. Caterna is in front of us, his mouth open, his white teeth ready to

bite, his eyes blinking, his revolver flourishing about. The actor has given place to the old sailor who has reappeared for the occasion.

"These beggars want to board us!" said he. "Forward, forward, for the honor of the flag! To port, there, fire! To starboard, there, fire! All together, fire!"

And it was with no property daggers he was armed, nor dummy pistols loaded with Edouard Philippe's inoffensive powder. No! A revolver in each hand, he was bounding along, firing, as he said, right and left and everywhere.

Pan-Chao also exposed himself bravely, a smile on his lips, gallantly leading on the other Chinese passengers. Popof and the railwaymen did their duty bravely. Sir Francis Trevellyan, of Trevellyan Hall, took matters very coolly, but Ephrinell abandoned himself to true Yankee fury, being no less irritated at the interruption to his marriage as to the danger run by his forty-two packages of artificial teeth.

And in short, the band of robbers met with a much more serious resistance than they expected.

And Baron Weisschnitzerdörfer? Well, he is one of the most furious of us all. He sweats blood and water, his fury carries him away at the risk of his being massacred. Many times we have to rescue him. These rails lifted, this train stopped, this attack in the open Gobi desert, the delays that it will all occasion, the mailboat lost at Tientsin,

the voyage round the world spoiled, his plan come to grief before he had half accomplished it! What a shock to his German self-esteem!

Faruskiar, my hero--I cannot call him anything else--displays extraordinary intrepidity, bearing himself the boldest in the struggle, and when he had exhausted his revolver, using his kandijar like a man who had often faced death and never feared it.

Already there were a few wounded on both sides, perhaps a few dead among the passengers who lay on the line. I have had my shoulder grazed by a bullet, a simple scratch I have hardly noticed. The Reverend Nathaniel Morse does not think that his sacred character compels him to cross his arms, and, from the way he works, one would not imagine that it was the first time he has handled firearms. Caterna has his hat shot through, and it will be remembered that it is his village bridegroom's hat, the gray beaver, with the long fur. He utters a gigantic maritime oath, something about thunder and portholes, and then, taking a most deliberate aim, quietly shoots stone dead the ruffian who has taken such a liberty with his best headgear.

For ten minutes or so the battle continues with most alarming alternations. The number of wounded on both sides increases, and the issue is still doubtful. Faruskiar and Ghangir and the Mongols have been driven back toward the precious van, which the Chinese guard have not left for an instant. But two or three of them have been mortally wounded, and their officer has just been killed by a bullet in the head. And my hero does all that the most ardent courage can do for the

defence of the treasure of the Son of Heaven.

I am getting uneasy at the prolongation of the combat. It will continue evidently as long as the chief of the band--a tall man with a black beard--urges on his accomplices to the attack on the train. Up till now he has escaped unhurt, and, in spite of all we can do, he is gaining ground. Shall we be obliged to take refuge in the vans, as behind the walls of a fortress, to entrench ourselves, to fight until the last has succumbed? And that will not be long, if we cannot stop the retrograde movement which is beginning on our side.

To the reports of the guns there are now added the cries of the women, who in their terror are running about the gangways, although Miss Bluett and Madame Caterna are trying to keep them inside the cars. A few bullets have gone through the panels, and I am wondering if any of them have hit Kinko.

Major Noltitz comes near me and says: "This is not going well."

"No, it is not going well," I reply, "and I am afraid the ammunition will give out. We must settle their commander-in-chief. Come, major--"

But what we are about to do was done by another at that very instant.

This other was Faruskiar. Bursting through the ranks of the assailants, he cleared them off the line, in spite of the blows they aimed at him. He is in front of the bandit chief, he raises his arm, he stabs him

full in the chest.

Instantly the thieves beat a retreat, without even carrying off their dead and wounded. Some run across the plain, some disappear in the thickets. Why pursue them, now that the battle has ended in our favor? And I must say that without the admirable valor of Faruskiar, I do not expect any of us would have lived to tell the story.

But the chief of the bandits is not dead, although the blood flows abundantly from his chest.

He has fallen with one knee on the ground, one hand up, with the other he is supporting himself.

Faruskiar stands over him, towering above him.

Suddenly he rises in a last effort, his arm threatens his adversary, he looks at him.

A last thrust of the kandijar is driven into his heart.

Faruskiar returns, and in Russian, with perfect calmness, remarks:

"Ki-Tsang is dead! So perish all who bear weapons against the Son of Heaven!"