

CHAPTER XXI.

And so it was Ki-Tsang who had just attacked the Grand Transasiatic on the plains of Gobi. The pirate of Vunnan had learned that a van containing gold and precious stones of enormous value had formed part of this train! And was there anything astonishing in that, considering that the newspapers, even those of Paris, had published the fact many days before? So Ki-Tsang had had time to prepare his attempt, and had lifted a portion of the rails, and would probably have succeeded in carrying off the treasure if Faruskiar had not brought him to his feet. That is why our hero had been so uneasy all the morning; if he had been looking out over the desert so persistently, it was because he had been warned of Ki-Tsang's plans by the last Mongol who had joined the train at Tchertchen! Under any circumstances we had now nothing to fear from Ki-Tsang. The manager of the company had done justice on the bandit--speedy justice, I admit. But we are in the midst of the deserts of Mongolia, where there are no juries as yet, which is a good thing for the Mongols.

"Well," said I to the major, "I hope you have abandoned your suspicions with regard to my lord Faruskiar?"

"To a certain extent, Monsieur Bombarnac!" Only to a certain extent? Evidently Major Noltitz is difficult to please.

But let us hasten on and count our victims. On our side there are three dead, including the Chinese officer, and more than twelve wounded, four of them seriously, the rest slightly, so that they can continue their journey to Peking. Popof escaped without a scratch, Caterna with a slight graze which his wife insists on bathing.

The major has the wounded brought into the cars and does the best for them under the circumstances. Doctor Tio-King offers his services, but they seem to prefer the Russian army surgeon, and that I understand. As to those who have fallen it is best for us to take them on to the next station and there render them the last services.

The thieves had abandoned their dead. We covered them over with a little sand, and that is all we need say.

The place where we had been stopped was halfway between Tcharkalyk and Tchertchen, the only two stations from which we could procure help. Unfortunately they were no longer in telegraphic communication, Ki-Tsang having knocked down the posts at the same time as he lifted the rails.

Hence a discussion as to what was the best thing to be done, which was not of long duration.

As the engine had run off the rails, the very first thing to do was evidently to get it onto them again; then as there was a gap in the

line, the simplest thing to do was to run back to Tchertchen, and wait there until the company's workmen had repaired the damage, which they could easily do in a couple of days.

We set to work without losing a moment. The passengers were only too glad to help Popof and the officials who had at their disposal a few tools, including jacks, levers and hammers, and in three hours the engine and tender were again on the line.

The most difficult business is over. With the engine behind we can proceed at slow speed to Tchertchen. But what lost time! What delays! And what recriminations from our German baron, what donnervetters and teufels and other German expletives!

I have omitted to say that immediately after the dispersal of the bandits we had in a body thanked Faruskiar. The hero received our thanks with all the dignity of an Oriental.

"I only did my duty as general manager of the company," he replied, with a truly noble modesty.

And then at his orders the Mongols had set to work, and I noticed that they displayed indefatigable ardor, for which they earned our sincere felicitations.

Meanwhile Faruskiar and Ghangir were often talking together in a whisper, and from these interviews arose a proposition which none of us

expected.

"Guard," said Faruskiar, addressing Popof, "it is my opinion that we had much better run on to Tcharkalyk than go back; it would suit the passengers much better."

"Certainly, sir, it would be preferable," said Popof; "but the line is broken between here and Tcharkalyk, and we cannot get through."

"Not at present, but we could get the cars through if we could temporarily repair the line."

That was a proposal worth consideration, and we assembled to consider it, Major Noltitz, Pan-Chao, Fulk Ephrinell, Caterna, the clergyman, Baron Weisschnitzerdörfer, and a dozen others--all who understood Russian.

Faruskiar spoke as follows:

"I have been looking at the portion of the line damaged by the band of Ki-Tsang. Most of the sleepers are still in place. As to the rails, the scoundrels have simply thrown them onto the sand, and by replacing them end to end it would be easy to get the train over to the uninjured track. It would not take a day to do this, and five hours afterward we should be at Tcharkalyk."

Excellent notion, at once approved of by Popof, the driver, the

passengers, and particularly by the baron. The plan was possible, and if there were a few rails useless, we could bring to the front those we had already run over, and in this way get over the difficulty.

Evidently this Faruskiar is a man, he is our true chief, he is the personage I was in want of, and I will sound his name over the entire universe in all the trumpets of my chronicle!

And yet Major Noltitz is mistaken enough to see in him only a rival to this Ki-Tsang, whose crimes have just received their final punishment from his hand!

We set to work to replace the sleepers that had been shifted aside from where they had left their mark, and we continued our task without intermission.

Having no fear of being noticed amid the confusion which followed the attack, I went into the luggage van to assure myself that Kinko was safe and sound, to tell him what had passed, to caution him on no account to come out of his box. He promised me, and I was at ease regarding him.

It was nearly three o'clock when we began work. The rails had been shifted for about a hundred yards. As Faruskiar remarked, it was not necessary for us to fix them permanently. That would be the task of the workmen the company would send from Tcharkalyk when we reached that station, which is one of the most important on the line.

As the rails were heavy we divided ourselves into detachments. First-class and second-class, all worked together with good will. The baron displayed tremendous ardor. Ephrinell, who thought no more of his marriage than if he had never thought about it, devoted strict attention to business. Pan-Chao was second to nobody, and even Doctor Tio-King strove to make himself useful--in the fashion of the celebrated Auguste, the fly on the chariot wheel.

"It is hot, this Gobi sun!" said Caterna.

Alone sat Sir Francis Trevellyan of Trevellyanshire, calm and impassive in his car, utterly regardless of our efforts.

At seven o'clock thirty yards of the line had been repaired. The night was closing in. It was decided to wait until the morning. In half a day we could finish the work, and in the afternoon we could be off again.

We were in great want of food and sleep. After so rude a task, how rude the appetite! We met in the dining car without distinction of classes. There was no scarcity of provisions, and a large breach was made in the reserves. Never mind! We can fill up again at Tcharkalyk.

Caterna is particularly cheery, talkative, facetious, communicative, overflowing. At dessert he and his wife sang the air--appropriate to the occasion--from the *Voyage en Chine*, which we caught up with more power than precision:

"China is a charming land
Which surely ought to please you."

Oh! Labiche, could you ever have imagined that this adorable composition would one day charm passengers in distress on the Grand Transasiatic? And then our actor--a little fresh, I admit--had an idea. And such an idea! Why not resume the marriage ceremony interrupted by the attack on the train?

"What marriage?" asked Ephrinell.

"Yours, sir, yours," replied Caterna. "Have you forgotten it? That is rather too good!"

The fact is that Fulk Ephrinell, on the one part, and Horatia Bluett, on the other part, seemed to have forgotten that had it not been for the attack of Ki-Tsang and his band they would now have been united in the gentle bonds of matrimony.

But we were all too tired. The Reverend Nathaniel Morse was unequal to the task; he would not have strength enough to bless the pair, and the pair would not have strength enough to support his blessing. The ceremony could be resumed on the day after to-morrow. Between Tcharkalyk and Lan Tcheou there was a run of nine hundred kilometres, and that was quite long enough for this Anglo-American couple to be linked together in.

And so we all went to our couches or benches for a little refreshing sleep. But at the same time the requirements of prudence were not neglected.

Although it appeared improbable, now that their chief had succumbed, the bandits might still make a nocturnal attack. There were always these cursed millions of the Son of Heaven to excite their covetousness, and if we are not on our guard--

But we feel safe. Faruskiar in person arranges for the surveillance of the train. Since the death of the officer he has taken command of the Chinese detachment. He and Ghangir are on guard over the imperial treasure, and according to Caterna, who is never in want of a quotation from some comic opera:

"This night the maids of honor will be guarded well."

And, in fact, the imperial treasure was much better guarded than the beautiful Athenais de Solange between the first and second acts of the *Mousquetaires de la Reine*.

At daybreak next morning we are at work. The weather is superb. The day will be warm. Out in the Asian desert on the 24th of May the temperature is such that you can cook eggs if you only cover them with a little sand.

Zeal was not wanting, and the passengers worked as hard as they had done the night before. The line was gradually completed. One by one the sleepers were replaced, the rails were laid end to end, and about four o'clock in the afternoon the gap was bridged.

At once the engine began to advance slowly, the cars following until they were over the temporary track and safe again. Now the road is clear to Tcharkalyk; what do I say? to Peking.

We resume our places. Popof gives the signal for departure as Caterna trolls out the chorus of victory of the admiral's sailors in Haydee.

A thousand cheers reply to him. At ten o'clock in the evening the train enters Tcharkalyk station.

We are exactly thirty hours behind time. But is not thirty hours enough to make Baron Weisschnitzerdörfer lose the mail from Tient-Tsin to Yokohama?