

## CHAPTER XXIII.

I have not seen Kinko for two days, and the last was only to exchange a few words with him to relieve his anxiety.

To-night I will try and visit him. I have taken care to lay in a few provisions at Sou-Tcheou.

We started at three o'clock. We have got a more powerful engine on. Across this undulating country the gradients are occasionally rather steep. Seven hundred kilometres separate us from the important city of Lan-Tcheou, where we ought to arrive to-morrow morning, running thirty miles an hour.

I remarked to Pan-Chao that this average was not a high one.

"What would you have?" he replied, crunching the watermelon seeds. "You will not change, and nothing will change the temperament of the Celestials. As they are conservatives in all things, so will they be conservative in this matter of speed, no matter how the engine may be improved. And, besides, Monsieur Bombarnac, that there are railways at all in the Middle Kingdom is a wonder to me."

"I agree with you, but where you have a railway you might as well get all the advantage out of it that you can."

"Bah!" said Pan-Chao carelessly.

"Speed," said I, "is a gain of time--and to gain time--"

"Time does not exist in China, Monsieur Bombarnac, and it cannot exist for a population of four hundred millions. There would not be enough for everybody. And so we do not count by days and hours, but always by moons and watches."

"Which is more poetical than practical," I remark.

"Practical, Mr. Reporter? You Westerners are never without that word in your mouth. To be practical is to be the slave of time, work, money, business, the world, everybody else, and one's self included. I confess that during my stay in Europe--you can ask Doctor Tio-King--I have not been very practical, and now I return to Asia I shall be less so. I shall let myself live, that is all, as the cloud floats in the breeze, the straw on the stream, as the thought is borne away by the imagination."

"I see," said I, "we must take China as it is."

"And as it will probably always be, Monsieur Bombarnac. Ah! if you knew how easy the life is--an adorable dolce far niente between folding screens in the quietude of the yamens. The cares of business trouble us little; the cares of politics trouble us less. Think! Since Fou Hi, the

first emperor in 2950, a contemporary of Noah, we are in the twenty-third dynasty. Now it is Manchoo; what it is to be next what matters? Either we have a government or we have not; and which of its sons Heaven has chosen for the happiness of four hundred million subjects we hardly know, and we hardly care to know."

It is evident that the young Celestial is a thousand and ten times wrong, to use the numerative formula; but it is not for me to tell him so.

At dinner Mr. and Mrs. Ephrinell, sitting side by side, hardly exchanged a word. Their intimacy seems to have decreased since they were married. Perhaps they are absorbed in the calculation of their reciprocal interests, which are not yet perfectly amalgamated. Ah! they do not count by moons and watches, these Anglo-Saxons! They are practical, too practical!

We have had a bad night. The sky of purple sulphury tint became stormy toward evening, the atmosphere became stifling, the electrical tension excessive. It meant a "highly successful" storm, to quote Caterna, who assured me he had never seen a better one except perhaps in the second act of Freyschütz. In truth the train ran through a zone, so to speak, of vivid lightning and rolling thunder, which the echoes of the mountains prolonged indefinitely. I think there must have been several lightning strokes, but the rails acted as conductors, and preserved the cars from injury. It was a fine spectacle, a little alarming, these fires in the sky that the heavy rain could not put out--these

continuous discharges from the clouds, in which were mingled the strident whistlings of our locomotive as we passed through the stations of Yanlu, Youn Tcheng, Houlan-Sien and Da-Tsching.

By favor of this troubled night I was able to communicate with Kinko, to take him some provisions and to have a few minutes' conversation with him.

"Is it the day after to-morrow," he asked, "that we arrive at Peking?"

"Yes, the day after to-morrow, if the train is not delayed."

"Oh, I am not afraid of delays! But when my box is in the railway station at Peking, I have still to get to the Avenue Cha-Coua--"

"What does it matter, will not the fair Zinca Klork come and call for it?"

"No. I advised her not to do so."

"And why?"

"Women are so impressionable! She would want to see the van in-which I had come, she would claim the box with such excitement that suspicions would be aroused. In short, she would run the risk of betraying me."

"You are right, Kinko."

"Besides, we shall reach the station in the afternoon, very late in the afternoon perhaps, and the unloading of the packages will not take place until next morning--"

"Probably."

"Well, Monsieur Bombarnac, if I am not taking too great a liberty, may I ask a favor of you?"

"What is it?"

"That you will be present at the departure of the case, so as to avoid any mistake."

"I will be there, Kinko, I will be there. Glass fragile, I will see that they don't handle it too roughly. And if you like I will accompany the case to Avenue Cha-Coua--"

"I hardly like to ask you to do that--"

"You are wrong, Kinko. You should not stand on ceremony with a friend, and I am yours, Kinko. Besides, it will be a pleasure to me to make the acquaintance of Mademoiselle Zinca Klork. I will be there when they deliver the box, the precious box. I will help her to get the nails out of it--"

"The nails out of it, Monsieur Bombarnac? My panel? Ah, I will jump through my panel!"

A terrible clap of thunder interrupted our conversation. I thought the train had been thrown off the line by the commotion of the air. I left the young Roumanian and regained my place within the car.

In the morning--26th of May, 7 A.M.--we arrived at Lan-Tcheou. Three hours to stop, three hours only.

"Come, Major Noltitz, come, Pan-Chao, come, Caterna, we have not a minute to spare."

But as we are leaving the station we are stopped by the appearance of a tall, fat, gray, solemn personage. It is the governor of the town in a double robe of white and yellow silk, fan in hand, buckled belt, and a mantilla--a black mantilla which would have looked much better on the shoulders of a manola. He is accompanied by a certain number of globular mandarins, and the Celestials salute him by holding out their two fists, which they move up and down as they nod their heads.

"Ah! What is this gentleman going to do? Is it some Chinese formality? A visit to the passengers and their baggage? And Kinko, what about him?"

Nothing alarming, after all. It is only about the treasure of the Son of Heaven. The governor and his suite have stopped before the precious van, bolted and sealed, and are looking at it with that respectful

admiration which is experienced even in China before a box containing many millions.

I ask Popof what is meant by the governor's presence, has it anything to do with us?

"Not at all," says Popof; "the order has come from Peking to telegraph the arrival of the treasure. The governor has done so, and he is awaiting a reply as to whether he is to send it on to Peking or keep it provisionally at Lan-Tcheou."

"That will not delay us?"

"I don't think so."

"Then come on," said I to my companions. But if the imperial treasure was a matter of indifference to us, it did not seem to be so to Faruskiar. But whether this van started or did not start, whether it was attached to our train or left behind, what could it matter to him? Nevertheless, he and Ghangir seemed to be much put about regarding it, although they tried to hide their anxiety, while the Mongols, talking together in a low tone, gave the governor anything but friendly glances.

Meanwhile the governor had just heard of the attack on the train and of the part that our hero had taken in defence of the treasure, with what courage he had fought, and how he had delivered the country from the terrible Ki-Tsang. And then in laudatory terms, which Pan-Chao

translated to us, he thanked Faruskiar, complimented him, and gave him to understand that the Son of Heaven would reward him for his services.

The manager of the Grand Transasiatic listened with that tranquil air that distinguished him, not without impatience, as, I could clearly see. Perhaps he felt himself superior to praises as well as recompenses, no matter from how great a height they might come. In that I recognized all the Mongol pride.

But we need not wait. The treasure van may remain here or go on to Peking, but it makes no difference to us! Our business is to visit Lan-Tcheou.

What we did briefly I will more briefly tell.

There is an outer town and an inner one. No ruins this time. A very lively city, population swarming like ants and very active, familiarized by the railway with the presence of strangers whom they do not follow about with indiscreet curiosity as they used to do. Huge quarters occupy the right of the Hoang Ho, two kilometres wide. This Hoang Ho is the yellow river, the famous yellow river, which, after a course of four thousand four hundred kilometres, pours its muddy waters into the Gulf of Petchili.

"Is not its mouth near Tien Tsin, where the baron thinks of catching the mail for Yokohama?" asks the major.



"That is so," I reply.

"He will miss it," says the actor.

"Unless he trots, our globe-trotter."

"A donkey's trot does not last long," says Caterna, "and he will not catch the boat."

"He will catch it if the train is no later," said the major. "We shall be at Tien Tsin on the 23d at six o'clock in the morning, and the steamer leaves at eleven."

"Whether he misses the boat or not, my friends, do not let us miss our walk."

A bridge of boats crosses the river, and the stream is so swift that the footway rises and falls like the waves of the sea. Madame Caterna, who had ventured on it, began to turn pale.

"Caroline, Caroline," said her husband, "you will be seasick! Pull yourself together; pull yourself together!"

She "pulled herself together," and we went up towards a pagoda which rises over the town.

Like all the monuments of this kind, the pagoda resembles a pile of

dessert dishes placed one on the other, but the dishes are of graceful form, and if they are in Chinese porcelain it is not astonishing.

We get an outside view of a cannon foundry, a rifle factory, the workmen being natives. Through a fine garden we reach the governor's house, with a capricious assemblage of bridges, kiosks, fountains and doors like vases. There are more pavilions and upturned roofs than there are trees and shady walks. Then there are paths paved with bricks, among them the remains of the base of the Great Wall.

It is ten minutes to ten when we return to the station, absolutely tired out; for the walk has been a rough one, and almost suffocating, for the heat is very great.

My first care is to look after the van with the millions. It is there as usual behind the train under the Chinese guard.

The message expected by the governor has arrived; the order to forward on the van to Peking, where the treasure is to be handed over to the finance minister.

Where is Faruskiar? I do not see him. Has he given us the slip?

No! There he is on one of the platforms, and the Mongols are back in the car.

Ephrinell has been off to do a round of calls--with his samples, no

doubt--and Mrs. Ephrinell has also been out on business, for a deal in hair probably. Here they come, and without seeming to notice one another they take their seats.

The other passengers are only Celestials. Some are going to Peking; some have taken their tickets for intermediate stations like Si-Ngan, Ho Nan. Lou-Ngan, Tai-Youan. There are a hundred passengers in the train. All my numbers are on board. There is not one missing. Thirteen, always thirteen!

We were still on the platform, just after the signal of departure had been given, when Caterna asked his wife what was the most curious thing she had seen at Lan-Tcheou.

"The most curious thing, Adolphe? Those big cages, hung on to the walls and trees, which held such curious birds--"

"Very curious, Madame Caterna," said Pan-Chao. "Birds that talk--"

"What--parrots?"

"No; criminals' heads."

"Horrible!" said the actress, with a most expressive grimace.

"What would you have, Caroline?" said Caterna. "It is the custom of the country."