

CHAPTER XXIV.

On leaving Lan-Tcheou, the railway crosses a well-cultivated country, watered by numerous streams, and hilly enough to necessitate frequent curves. There is a good deal of engineering work; mostly bridges, viaducts on wooden trestles of somewhat doubtful solidity, and the traveler is not particularly comfortable when he finds them bending under the weight of the train. It is true we are in the Celestial Empire, and a few thousand victims of a railway accident is hardly anything among a population of four hundred millions.

"Besides," said Pan-Chao, "the Son of Heaven never travels by railway."

So much the better.

At six o'clock in the evening we are at King-Tcheou, after skirting for some time the capricious meanderings of the Great Wall. Of this immense artificial frontier built between Mongolia and China, there remain only the blocks of granite and red quartzite which served as its base, its terrace of bricks with the parapets of unequal heights, a few old cannons eaten into with rust and hidden under a thick veil of lichens, and then the square towers with their ruined battlements. The interminable wall rises, falls, bends, bends back again, and is lost to sight on the undulations of the ground.

At six o'clock we halt for half an hour at King-Tcheou, of which I only saw a few pagodas, and about ten o'clock there is a halt of three-quarters of an hour at Si-Ngan, of which I did not even see the outline.

All night was spent in running the three hundred kilometres which separate this town from Ho Nan, where we had an hour to stop.

I fancy the Londoners might easily imagine that this town of Ho Nan was London, and perhaps Mrs. Ephrinell did so. Not because there was a Strand with its extraordinary traffic, nor a Thames with its prodigious movement of barges and steamboats. No! But because we were in a fog so thick that it was impossible to see either houses or pagodas.

The fog lasted all day, and this hindered the progress of the train. These Chinese engine-drivers are really very skilful and attentive and intelligent.

We were not fortunate in our last day's journey before reaching Tien Tsin! What a loss of copy! What paragraphs were melted away in these unfathomable vapors! I saw nothing of the gorges and ravines, through which runs the Grand Transasiatic; nothing of the valley of Lou-Ngan, where we stopped at eleven o'clock; nothing of the two hundred and thirty kilometres which we accomplished amid the wreaths of a sort of yellow steam, worthy of a yellow country, until we stopped about ten o'clock at night at Tai-Youan.

Ah! the disagreeable day.

Luckily the fog rose early in the evening. Now it is night--and a very dark night, too.

I go to the refreshment bar and buy a few cakes and a bottle of wine. My intention is to pay a last visit to Kinko. We will drink to his health, to his approaching marriage with the fair Roumanian. He has traveled by fraud, I know, and if the Grand Transasiatic only knew! But the Grand Transasiatic will not know.

During the stoppage Faruskiar and Ghangir are walking on the platform and looking at the train. But it is not the van at the rear that is attracting their attention, but the van in front, and they seem to be much interested in it.

Are they suspicious of Kinko? No! the hypothesis is unlikely. The driver and stoker seem to be the object of their very particular attention. They are two brave Chinamen who have just come on duty, and perhaps Faruskiar is not sorry to see men in whom he can trust, with this imperial treasure and a hundred passengers behind them!

The hour for departure strikes, and at midnight the engine begins to move, emitting two or three loud whistles.

As I have said, the night is very dark, without moon, without stars. Long clouds are creeping across the lower zones of the atmosphere. It

will be easy for me to enter the van without being noticed. And I have not been too liberal in my visits to Kinko during these twelve days on the road.

At this moment Popof says to me:

"Are you not going to sleep to-night, Monsieur Bombarnac?"

"I am in no hurry," I reply; "after this foggy day, spent inside the car, I am glad of a breath of fresh air. Where does the train stop next?"

"At Fuen-Choo, when it has passed the junction with the Nanking line."

"Good night, Popof."

"Good night, Monsieur Bombarnac."

I am alone.

The idea occurs to me to walk to the rear of the train, and I stop for an instant on the gangway in front of the treasure van.

The passengers, with the exception of the Chinese guard, are all sleeping their last sleep--their last, be it understood, on the Grand Transasiatic.

Returning to the front of the train, I approach Popof's box, and find him sound asleep.

I then open the door of the van, shut it behind me, and signal my presence to Kinko.

The panel is lowered, the little lamp is lighted. In exchange for the cakes and wine I receive the brave fellow's thanks, and we drink to the health of Zinca Klorck, whose acquaintance I am to make on the morrow.

It is ten minutes to one. In twelve minutes, so Popof says, we shall pass the junction with the Nanking branch. This branch is only completed for five or six kilometres, and leads to the viaduct over the Tjon valley. This viaduct is a great work--I have the details from Pan-Chao--and the engineers have as yet only got in the piers, which rise for a hundred feet above the ground.

As I know we are to halt at Fuen-Choo, I shake hands with Kinko, and rise to take my leave.

At this moment I seem to hear some one on the platform in the rear of the van.

"Look out, Kinko!" I say in a whisper.

The lamp is instantly extinguished, and we remain quite still.

I am not mistaken. Some one is opening the door of the van.

"Your panel," I whisper.

The panel is raised, the car is shut, and I am alone in the dark.

Evidently it must be Popof who has come in. What will he think to find me here? The first time I came to visit the young Roumanian I hid among the packages. Well, I will hide a second time. If I get behind Ephrinell's boxes it is not likely that Popof will see me, even by the light of his lantern.

I do so; and I watch.

It is not Popof, for he would have brought his lantern.

I try to recognize the people who have just entered. It is difficult. They have glided between the packages, and after opening the further door, they have gone out and shut it behind them.

They are some of the passengers, evidently; but why here--at this hour?

I must know. I have a presentiment that something is in the wind

Perhaps by listening?

I approach the front door of the van, and in spite of the rumbling of

the train I hear them distinctly enough--

Thousand and ten thousand devils! I am not mistaken! It is the voice of my lord Faruskiar. He is talking with Ghangir in Russian. It is indeed Faruskiar. The four Mongols have accompanied him. But what are they doing there? For what motive are they on the platform which is just behind the tender? And what are they saying?

What they are saying is this.

Of these questions and answers exchanged between my lord Faruskiar and his companions, I do not lose a word.

"When shall we be at the junction?"

"In a few minutes."

"Are you sure that Kardek is at the points?"

"Yes; that has been arranged."

What had been arranged? And who is this Kardek they are talking about?

The conversation continues.

"We must wait until we get the signal," says Faruskiar.

"Is that a green light?" asks Ghangir.

"Yes--it will show that the switch is over."

I do not know if I am in my right senses. The switch over? What switch?

A half minute elapses. Ought I not to tell Popof? Yes--I ought.

I was turning to go out of the van, when an exclamation kept me back.

"The signal--there is the signal!" says Ghangir.

"And now the train is on the Nanking branch!" replies Faruskiar.

The Nanking branch? But then we are lost. At five kilometres from here is the Tjon viaduct in course of construction, and the train is being precipitated towards an abyss.

Evidently Major Noltitz was not mistaken regarding my lord Faruskiar. I understand the scheme of the scoundrels. The manager of the Grand Transasiatic is a scoundrel of the deepest dye. He has entered the service of the company to await his opportunity for some extensive haul. The opportunity has come with the millions of the Son of Heaven I Yes! The whole abominable scheme is clear enough to me. Faruskiar has defended the imperial treasure against Ki-Tsang to keep it from the chief of the bandits who stopped the train, whose attack would have interfered with his criminal projects! That is why he had fought so

bravely. That is why he had risked his life and behaved like a hero.
And thou, poor beast of a Claudius, how thou hast been sold! Another
howler! Think of that, my friend!

But somehow we ought to prevent this rascal from accomplishing his
work. We ought to save the train which is running full speed towards
the unfinished viaduct, we ought to save the passengers from a
frightful catastrophe. As to the treasure Faruskiar and his accomplices
are after, I care no more than for yesterday's news! But the
passengers--and myself--that is another affair altogether.

I will go back to Popof. Impossible. I seem to be nailed to the floor
of the van. My head swims--

Is it true we are running towards the abyss? No! I am mad. Faruskiar
and his accomplices would be hurled over as well. They would share our
fate. They would perish with us!

But there are shouts in front of the train. The screams of people being
killed. There is no doubt now. The driver and the stoker are being
strangled. I feel the speed of the train begin to slacken.

I understand. One of the ruffians knows how to work the train, and he
is slowing it to enable them to jump off and avoid the catastrophe.

I begin to master my torpor. Staggering like a drunken man, I crawl to
Kinko's case. There, in a few words, I tell him what has passed, and I

exclaim:

"We are lost!"

"No--perhaps" he replies.

Before I can move, Kinko is out of his box. He rushes towards the front door; he climbs on to the tender.

"Come along! Come along!" he shouts.

I do not know how I have done it, but here I am at his side, on the foot-plate, my feet in the blood of the driver and stoker, who have been thrown off on to the line.

Faruskiar and his accomplices are no longer here.

But before they went one of them has taken off the brakes, jammed down the regulator to full speed, thrown fresh coals into the fire-box, and the train is running with frightful velocity.

In a few minutes we shall reach the Tjon viaduct.

Kinko, energetic and resolute, is as cool as a cucumber. But in vain he tries to move the regulator, to shut off the steam, to put on the brake. These valves and levers, what shall we do with them?

"I must tell Popof!" I shout.

"And what can he do? No; there is only one way--"

"And what is that?"

"Rouse up the fire," says Kinko, calmly; "shut down the safety valves, and blow up the engine."

And was that the only way--a desperate way--of stopping the train before it reached the viaduct?

Kinko scattered the coal on to the fire bars. He turned on the greatest possible draught, the air roared across the furnace, the pressure goes up, up, amid the heaving of the motion, the bellowings of the boiler, the beating of the pistons. We are going a hundred kilometres an hour.

"Get back!" shouts Kinko above the roar. "Get back into the van."

"And you, Kinko?"

"Get back, I tell you."

I see him hang on to the valves, and put his whole weight on the levers.

"Go!" he shouts.

I am off over the tender. I am through the van. I awake Popof, shouting with all my strength:

"Get back! Get back!"

A few passengers suddenly waking from sleep begin to run from the front car.

Suddenly there is an explosion and a shock. The train at first jumps back. Then it continues to move for about half a kilometre.

It stops.

Popof, the major, Caterna, most of the passengers are out on the line in an instant.

A network of scaffolding appears confusedly in the darkness, above the piers which were to carry the viaduct across the Tjon valley.

Two hundred yards further the train would have been lost in the abyss.