

CHAPTER XXV.

And I, who wanted "incident," who feared the weariness of a monotonous voyage of six thousand kilometres, in the course of which I should not meet with an impression or emotion worth clothing in type!

I have made another muddle of it, I admit! My lord Faruskiar, of whom I had made a hero--by telegraph--for the readers of the Twentieth Century. Decidedly my good intentions ought certainly to qualify me as one of the best paviors of a road to a certain place you have doubtless heard of.

We are, as I have said, two hundred yards from the valley of the Tjon, so deep and wide as to require a viaduct from three hundred and fifty to four hundred feet long. The floor of the valley is scattered over with rocks, and a hundred feet down. If the train had been hurled to the bottom of that chasm, not one of us would have escaped alive. This memorable catastrophe--most interesting from a reporter's point of view--would have claimed a hundred victims. But thanks to the coolness, energy and devotion of the young Roumanian, we have escaped this terrible disaster.

All? No! Kinko has paid with his life for the safety of his fellow passengers.

Amid the confusion my first care was to visit the luggage van, which had remained uninjured. Evidently if Kinko had survived the explosion he would have got back into his box and waited till I put myself in communication with him.

Alas! The coffer is empty--empty as that of a company which has suspended payment. Kinko has been the victim of his sacrifice.

And so there has been a hero among our traveling companions, and he was not this Faruskiar, this abominable bandit hidden beneath the skin of a manager, whose name I have so stupidly published over the four corners of the globe! It was this Roumanian, this humble, this little, this poor fellow, whose sweetheart will wait for him in vain, and whom she will never again see! Well, I will do him justice! I will tell what he has done. As to his secret, I shall be sorry if I keep it. If he defrauded the Grand Transasiatic, it is thanks to that fraud that a whole train has been saved. We were lost, we should have perished in the most horrible of deaths if Kinko had not been there!

I went back on to the line, my heart heavy, my eyes full of tears.

Assuredly Faruskiar's scheme--in the execution of which he had executed his rival Ki-Tsang--had been cleverly contrived in utilizing this branch line leading to the unfinished viaduct. Nothing was easier than to switch off the train if an accomplice was at the points. And as soon as the signal was given that we were on the branch, all he had to do was to gain the foot-plate, kill the driver and stoker, slow the train

and get off, leaving the steam on full to work up to full speed.

And now there could be no doubt that the scoundrels worthy of the most refined tortures that Chinese practice could devise were hastening down into the Tjon valley. There, amid the wreck of the train, they expected to find the fifteen millions of gold and precious stones, and this treasure they could carry off without fear of surprise when the night enabled them to consummate this fearful crime. Well! They have been robbed, these robbers, and I hope that they will pay for their crime with their lives, at the least. I alone know what has passed, but I will tell the story, for poor Kinko is no more.

Yes! My mind is made up. I will speak as soon as I have seen Zinca Klork. The poor girl must be told with consideration. The death of her betrothed must not come upon her like a thunderclap. Yes! To-morrow, as soon as we are at Peking.

After all, if I do not say anything about Kinko, I may at least denounce Faruskiar and Ghangir and the four Mongols. I can say that I saw them go through the van, that I followed them, that I found they were talking on the gangway, that I heard the screams of the driver and stoker as they were strangled on the foot-plate, and that I then returned to the cars shouting: "Back! Back!" or whatever it was.

Besides, as will be seen immediately, there was somebody else whose just suspicions had been changed into certainty, who only awaited his opportunity to denounce Faruskiar.

We are now standing at the head of the train, Major Noltitz, the German baron, Caterna, Ephrinell, Pan-Chao, Popof, about twenty travelers in all. The Chinese guard, faithful to their trust, are still near the treasure which not one of them has abandoned. The rear guard has brought along the tail lamps, and by their powerful light we can see in what a state the engine is.

If the train, which was then running at enormous velocity, had not stopped suddenly--and thus brought about its destruction--it was because the boiler had exploded at the top and on the side. The wheels being undamaged, the engine had run far enough to come gradually to a standstill of itself, and thus the passengers had been saved a violent shock.

Of the boiler and its accessories only a few shapeless fragments remained. The funnel had gone, the dome, the steam chest; there was nothing but torn plates, broken, twisted tubes, split cylinders, and loose connecting rods--gaping wounds in the corpse of steel.

And not only had the engine been destroyed, but the tender had been rendered useless. Its tank had been cracked, and its load of coals scattered over the line. The luggage-van, curious to relate, had miraculously escaped without injury.

And looking at the terrible effects of the explosion, I could see that the Roumanian had had no chance of escape, and had probably been blown

to fragments.

Going a hundred yards down the line I could find no trace of him--which was not to be wondered at.

At first we looked on at the disaster in silence; but eventually conversation began.

"It is only too evident," said one of the passengers, "that our driver and stoker have perished in the explosion."

"Poor fellows!" said Popof. "But I wonder how the train could have got on the Nanking branch without being noticed?"

"The night was very dark," said Ephrinell, "and the driver could not see the points."

"That is the only explanation possible," said Popof, "for he would have tried to stop the train, and, on the contrary, we were traveling at tremendous speed."

"But," said Pan-Chao, "how does it happen the Nanking branch was open when the Tjon viaduct is not finished? Had the switch been interfered with?"

"Undoubtedly," said Popof, "and probably out of carelessness."

"No," said Ephrinell, deliberately. "There has been a crime--a crime intended to bring about the destruction of the train and passengers--"

"And with what object?" asked Popof.

"The object of stealing the imperial treasure," said Ephrinell. "Do you forget that those millions would be a temptation to scoundrels? Was it not for the purpose of robbing the train that we were attacked between Tchertchen and Tcharkalyk?"

The American could not have been nearer the truth.

"And so," said Popof, "after Ki-Tsang's attempt, you think that other bandits--"

Up to now Major Noltitz had taken no part in the discussion. Now he interrupted Popof, and in a voice heard by all he asked:

"Where is Faruskiar?"

They all looked about and tried to discover what had become of the manager of the Transasiatic.

"And where is his friend Ghangir?" asked the major.

There was no reply.

"And where are the four Mongols who were in the rear van?" asked Major Noltitz.

And none of them presented themselves.

They called my lord Faruskiar a second time.

Faruskiar made no response.

Popof entered the car where this personage was generally to be found.

It was empty.

Empty? No. Sir Francis Trevelyan was calmly seated in his place, utterly indifferent to all that happened. Was it any business of his? Not at all. Was he not entitled to consider that the Russo-Chinese railways were the very apex of absurdity and disorder? A switch opened, nobody knew by whom! A train on the wrong line! Could anything be more ridiculous than this Russian mismanagement?

"Well, then!" said Major Noltitz, "the rascal who sent us on to the Nanking line, who would have hurled us into the Tjon valley, to walk off with the imperial treasure, is Faruskiar."

"Faruskiar!" the passengers exclaimed. And most of them refused to believe it.

"What!" said Popof. "The manager of the company who so courageously drove off the bandits and killed their chief Ki-Tsang with his own hand?"

Then I entered on the scene.

"The major is not mistaken. It was Faruskiar who laid this fine trap for us."

And amid the general stupefaction I told them what I knew, and what good fortune had enabled me to ascertain. I told them how I had overheard the plan of Faruskiar and his Mongols, when it was too late to stop it, but I was silent regarding the intervention of Kinko. The moment had not come, and I would do him justice in due time.

To my words there succeeded a chorus of maledictions and menaces.

What! This seigneur Faruskiar, this superb Mongol, this functionary we had seen at work! No! It was impossible.

But they had to give in to the evidence. I had seen; I had heard; I affirmed that Faruskiar was the author of this catastrophe in which all our train might have perished, was the most consummate bandit who had ever disgraced Central Asia!

"You see, Monsieur Bombarnac," said Major Noltitz, "that I was not mistaken in my first suspicion."

"It is only too true," I replied, without any false modesty, "that I was taken in by the grand manners of the abominable rascal."

"Monsieur Claudius," said Caterna, "put that into a romance, and see if anybody believes it likely."

Caterna was right; but unlikely as it may seem, it was. And, besides, I alone knew Kinko's secret. It certainly did seem as though it was miraculous for the locomotive to explode just on the verge of the abyss.

Now that all danger had disappeared we must take immediate measures for running back the cars on to the Pekin line.

"The best thing to do is for one of us to volunteer--"

"I will do that," said Caterna.

"What is he to do?" I asked.

"Go to the nearest station, that of Fuen Choo, and telegraph to Tai-Youan for them to send on a relief engine."

"How far is it to Fuen Choo?" asked Ephrinell.

"About six kilometres to Nanking junction, and about five kilometres beyond that."

"Eleven kilometres," said the major; "that is a matter of an hour and a half for good walkers. Before three o'clock the engine from Tai-Youan ought to be here. I am ready to start."

"So am I," said Popof! "I think several of us ought to go. Who knows if we may not meet Faruskiar and his Mongols on the road?"

"You are right, Popof," said Major Noltitz, "and we should be armed."

This was only prudent, for the bandits who ought to be on their way to the Tjon viaduct could not be very far off. Of course, as soon as they found that their attempt had failed, they would hasten to get away. How would they dare--six strong--to attack a hundred passengers, including the Chinese guard?

Twelve of us, including Pan-Chao, Caterna, and myself, volunteered to accompany Major Noltitz. But by common accord we advised Popof not to abandon the train, assuring him that we would do all that was necessary at Fuen Choo.

Then, armed with daggers and revolvers--it was one o'clock in the morning--we went along the line to the junction, walking as fast as the very dark night permitted.

In less than two hours we arrived at Fuen Choo station without adventure. Evidently Faruskiar had cleared off. The Chinese police

would have to deal with the bandit and his accomplices. Would they catch him? I hoped so, but I doubted.

At the station Pan-Chao explained matters to the stationmaster, who telegraphed for an engine to be sent from Tai-Youan to the Nanking line.

At three o'clock, just at daybreak, we returned to wait for the engine at the junction. Three-quarters of an hour afterwards its whistle announced its approach, and it stopped at the bifurcation of the lines. We climbed up on to the tender, and half an hour later had rejoined the train.

The dawn had come on sufficiently for us to be able to see over a considerable distance. Without saying anything to anybody, I went in search of the body of my poor Kinko. And I could not find it among the wreck.

As the engine could not reach the front of the train, owing to their being only a single line, and no turning-table, it was decided to couple it on in the rear and run backwards to the junction. In this way the box, alas! without the Roumanian in it, was in the last carriage.

We started, and in half an hour we were on the main line again.

Fortunately it was not necessary for us to return to Tai-Youan, and we thus saved a delay of an hour and a half. At the junction the engine was detached and run for a few yards towards Peking, then the vans and

cars, one by one, were pushed on to the main line, and then the engine backed and the train proceeded, made up as before the accident. By five o'clock we were on our way across Petchili as if nothing had happened.

I have nothing to say regarding this latter half of the journey, during which the Chinese driver--to do him justice--in no way endeavored to make up for lost time. But if a few hours more or less were of no importance to us, it was otherwise with Baron Weisschnitzerdörfer, who wanted to catch the Yokohama boat at Tien Tsin.

When we arrived there at noon the steamer had been gone for three-quarters of an hour; and when the German globe-trotter, the rival of Bly and Bisland, rushed on to the platform, it was to learn that the said steamer was then going out of the mouths of the Pei-Ho into the open sea.

Unfortunate traveler! We were not astonished when, as Gaterna said, the baron "let go both broadsides" of Teutonic maledictions. And really he had cause to curse in his native tongue.

We remained but a quarter of an hour at Tien Tsin. My readers must pardon me for not having visited this city of five hundred thousand inhabitants, the Chinese town with its temples, the European quarter in which the trade is concentrated, the Pei-Ho quays where hundreds of junks load and unload. It was all Faruskiar's fault, and were it only for having wrecked my reportorial endeavors he ought to be hanged by the most fantastic executioner in China.

Nothing happened for the rest of our run. I was very sorry at the thought that I was not bringing Kinko along with me, and that his box was empty. And he had asked me to accompany him to Mademoiselle Zinca Klork! How could I tell this unfortunate girl that her sweetheart would never reach Peking station?

Everything ends in this world below, even a voyage of six thousand kilometres on the Grand Transasiatic; and after a run of thirteen days, hour after hour, our train stopped at the gates of the capital of the Celestial Empire.