

CHAPTER VI.

IN WHICH THE READER MAKES THE ACQUAINTANCE OF A NEW PERSONAGE.

The voyage had begun. There had not been much difficulty so far, it must be admitted.

Professor Tartlet, with incontestable logic, often repeated,--

"Any voyage can begin! But where and how it finishes is the important point."

The cabin occupied by Godfrey was below the poop of the Dream and opened on to the dining-saloon. Our young traveller was lodged there as comfortably as possible. He had given Phina's photograph the best place on the best lighted panel of his room. A cot to sleep on, a lavatory for toilet purposes, some chests of drawers for his clothes and his linen, a table to work at, an armchair to sit upon, what could a young man in his twenty-second year want more? Under such circumstances he might have gone twenty-two times round the world! Was he not at the age of that practical philosophy which consists in good health and good humour? Ah! young people, travel if you can, and if you cannot--travel all the same!

Tartlet was not in a good humour. His cabin, near that of his pupil, seemed to him too narrow, his bed too hard, the six square yards which

he occupied quite insufficient for his steps and strides. Would not the traveller in him absorb the professor of dancing and deportment? No! It was in the blood, and when Tartlet reached the hour of his last sleep his feet would be found placed in a horizontal line with the heels one against the other, in the first position.

Meals were taken in common. Godfrey and Tartlet sat opposite to each other, the captain and mate occupying each end of the rolling table. This alarming appellation, the "rolling table," is enough to warn us that the professor's place would too often be vacant.

At the start, in the lovely month of June, there was a beautiful breeze from the north-east, and Captain Turcott was able to set his canvas so as to increase his speed. The Dream thus balanced hardly rolled at all, and as the waves followed her, her pitching was but slight. This mode of progressing was not such as to affect the looks of the passengers and give them pinched noses, hollow eyes, livid foreheads, or colourless cheeks. It was supportable. They steered south-west over a splendid sea, hardly lifting in the least, and the American coast soon disappeared below the horizon.

For two days nothing occurred worthy of mention. The Dream made good progress. The commencement of the voyage promised well--so that Captain Turcott seemed occasionally to feel an anxiety which he tried in vain to hide. Each day as the sun crossed the meridian he carefully took his observations. But it could be noticed that immediately afterwards he retired with the mate into his cabin, and then they remained in secret

conclave as if they were discussing some grave eventuality. This performance passed probably unnoticed by Godfrey, who understood nothing about the details of navigation, but the boatswain and the crew seemed somewhat astonished at it, particularly as for two or three times during the first week, when there was not the least necessity for the manoeuvre, the course of the Dream at night was completely altered, and resumed again in the morning. In a sailing-ship this might be intelligible; but in a steamer, which could keep on the great circle line and only use canvas when the wind was favourable, it was somewhat extraordinary.

During the morning of the 12th of June a very unexpected incident occurred on board.

Captain Turcott, the mate, and Godfrey, were sitting down to breakfast when an unusual noise was heard on deck. Almost immediately afterwards the boatswain opened the door and appeared on the threshold.

"Captain!" he said.

"What's up?" asked Turcott, sailor as he was, always on the alert.

"Here's a--Chinee!" said the boatswain.

"A Chinese!"

"Yes! a genuine Chinese we have just found by chance at the bottom of the hold!"

"At the bottom of the hold!" exclaimed Turcott. "Well, by all the--somethings--of Sacramento, just send him to the bottom of the sea!"

"All right!" answered the boatswain.

And that excellent man with all the contempt of a Californian for a son of the Celestial Empire, taking the order as quite a natural one, would have had not the slightest compunction in executing it.

However, Captain Turcott rose from his chair, and followed by Godfrey and the mate, left the saloon and walked towards the forecastle of the Dream.

There stood a Chinaman, tightly handcuffed, and held by two or three sailors, who were by no means sparing of their nudges and knocks. He was a man of from five-and-thirty to forty, with intelligent features, well built, of lithe figure, but a little emaciated, owing to his sojourn for sixteen hours at the bottom of a badly ventilated hold.

Captain Turcott made a sign to his men to leave the unhappy intruder alone.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"A son of the sun."

"And what is your name?"

"Seng Vou," answered the Chinese, whose name in the Celestial language signifies "he who does not live."

"And what are you doing on board here?"

"I am out for a sail!" coolly answered Seng Vou, "but am doing you as little harm as I can."

"Really! as little harm!--and you stowed yourself away in the hold when we started?"

"Just so, captain."

"So that we might take you for nothing from America to China, on the other side of the Pacific?"

"If you will have it so."

"And if I don't wish to have it so, you yellow-skinned nigger. If I will have it that you have to swim to China."

"I will try," said the Chinaman with a smile, "but I shall probably sink on the road!"

"Well, John," exclaimed Captain Turcott, "I am going to show you how to save your passage-money."

And Captain Turcott, much more angry than circumstances necessitated, was perhaps about to put his threat into execution, when Godfrey intervened.

"Captain," he said, "one more Chinese on board the Dream is one Chinese less in California, where there are too many."

"A great deal too many!" answered Captain Turcott.

"Yes, too many. Well, if this poor beggar wishes to relieve San Francisco of his presence, he ought to be pitied! Bah! we can throw him on shore at Shanghai, and there needn't be any fuss about it!"

In saying that there were too many Chinese in California Godfrey held the same language as every true Californian. The emigration of the sons of the Celestial Empire--there are 300,000,000 in China as against 30,000,000 of Americans in the United States--has become dangerous to the provinces of the Far West; and the legislators of these States of California, Lower California, Oregon, Nevada, Utah, and even Congress itself, are much concerned at this new epidemic of invasion, to which the Yankees have given the name of the "yellow-plague."

At this period there were more than 50,000 Chinese, in the State of

California alone. These people, very industrious at gold-washing, very patient, living on a pinch of rice, a mouthful of tea, and a whiff of opium, did an immense deal to bring down the price of manual labour, to the detriment of the native workmen. They had to submit to special laws, contrary to the American constitution--laws which regulated their immigration, and withheld from them the right of naturalization, owing to the fear that they would end by obtaining a majority in the Congress. Generally ill-treated, much as Indians or negroes, so as to justify the title of "pests" which was applied to them, they herded together in a sort of ghetto, where they carefully kept up the manners and customs of the Celestial Empire.

In the Californian capital, it is in the Sacramento Street district, decked with their banners and lanterns, that this foreign race has taken up its abode. There they can be met in thousands, trotting along in their wide-sleeved blouses, conical hats, and turned-up shoes. Here, for the most part, they live as grocers, gardeners, or laundresses--unless they are working as cooks or belong to one of those dramatic troupes which perform Chinese pieces in the French theatre at San Francisco.

And--there is no reason why we should conceal the fact--Seng Vou happened to form part of one of these troupes, in which he filled the rôle of "comic lead," if such a description can apply to any Chinese artiste. As a matter of fact they are so serious, even in their fun, that the Californian romancer, Bret Harte, has told us that he never saw a genuine Chinaman laugh, and has even confessed that he is unable to say whether one of the national pieces he witnessed was a tragedy or

a farce.

In short, Seng Vou was a comedian. The season had ended, crowned with success--perhaps out of proportion to the gold pieces he had amassed--he wished to return to his country otherwise than as a corpse, for Chinamen always like to get buried at home and there are special steamers who carry dead Celestials and nothing else. At all risks, therefore, he had secretly slipped on board the Dream.

Loaded with provisions, did he hope to get through, incognito, a passage of several weeks, and then to land on the coast of China without being seen?

It is just possible. At any rate, the case was hardly one for a death penalty.

So Godfrey had good reason to interfere in favour of the intruder, and Captain Turcott, who pretended to be angrier than he really was, gave up the idea of sending Seng Vou overboard to battle with the waves of the Pacific.

Seng Vou, however, did not return to his hiding-place in the hold, though he was rather an incubus on board. Phlegmatic, methodic, and by no means communicative, he carefully avoided the seamen, who had always some prank to play off on him, and he kept to his own provisions. He was thin enough in all conscience, and his additional weight but imperceptibly added to the cost of navigating the Dream. If Seng Vou

got a free passage it was obvious that his carriage did not cost William W. Kolderup very much.

His presence on board put into Captain Turcott's head an idea which his mate probably was the only one to understand thoroughly.

"He will bother us a bit--this confounded Chinee!--after all, so much the worse for him."

"What ever made him stow himself away on board the Dream?" answered the mate.

"To get to Shanghai!" replied Captain Turcott. "Bless John and all John's sons too!"