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THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

A vehicle carrying the mail usually runs across the Ural mountains, but at the present time this, of course, was discontinued. Even if it had not been so, Michael Strogoff would not have taken it, as he wished to travel as fast as possible without depending on any one. He wisely preferred to buy a carriage and journey by stages, stimulating the zeal of the postillions by tips.

Unfortunately, in consequence of the measures taken against foreigners of Russian origin, a large number of travelers had already left Perm, and therefore conveyances were extremely rare. Michael was obliged to content himself with what had been rejected by others. As to horses, as long as the czar's courier was not in Siberia he could exhibit his podorojna without danger, and the postmasters would give him the preference. But once out of European Russia, he had to depend alone on the power of his rubles.

But to what sort of vehicle should he harness his horses? Michael Strogoff was lucky enough to discover a tarantass.

It is to be hoped that the invention of Russian coachbuilders will devise some improvement in this last named vehicle. Springs are wanting in it, so it is very uncomfortable. In the absence of iron, wood is not spared, but its four wheels, with eight or nine feet between them, assure a certain equilibrium over the jolting, rough roads. A splash board protects the travelers from the mud, and a strong leather hood, which may be pulled quite over the occupiers, shelters them from the great heat and violent storms of the summer.

It was not without careful search that Michael managed to discover this tarantass, and there was probably not a second to be found in all the town of Perm. Notwithstanding that, he bagged long about the price, for form's sake, to set up to his part as Nicholas Korpanoff, a plain merchant of Irkutsk.

Nadia had followed her companion in his search after a suitable vehicle. Although the object of each was different, both were equally anxious to arrive and consequently to start. One would have said the same will animated them both.

"Sister," said Michael, "I wish I could have found a more comfortable conveyance for you."

"Do you say that to me, brother, when I would have gone on foot, if I needed you, to rejoin my father?"

"I do not doubt your courage, Nadia, but there are physical fatigues which woman may be unable to endure."

"I shall endure them, whatever they may be," replied the girl. "If you ever hear a complaint from my lips, you may leave me in the road and continue your journey alone."

Half an hour later on, the podorojna being presented by Michael, three post horses were harnessed to the tarantass. These animals, covered with long hair, were very like long legged bears. They were small, but spirited, being of Siberian breed.

They were harnessed thus: One, the largest, was secured between two long shafts on whose farther end was a hoop called a douga, carrying tassels and bells. The two others were simply fastened by ropes to the steps of the tarantass. This was the complete harness, with mere strings for reins.

Neither Michael Strogoff nor the young Livonian girl had any baggage. The rapidity with which one wished to make the journey and the more than modest resources of the other prevented them from embarrassing themselves with packages. It was a fortunate thing under the circumstances, for the tarantass could not have carried both baggage and travelers. It was only made for two persons, without counting the driver, who kept his equilibrium on his narrow seat in a marvelous manner.

The driver is changed at every relay. The man who drove the tarantass during the first stage was, like his horses, a Siberian and no less shaggy than they—long hair, cut square on the forehead, hat with turned up rim, red belt, coat with crossed facings and buttons stamped with the imperial cipher. The driver on coming up with his team threw an inquisitive glance at the passengers of the tarantass. No luggage? And had there been, where in the world could he have stowed it? Rather shabby in appearance too. He looked contemptuous.

"Crows," said he, without caring whether he was overheard or not; "crows at 6 copecks a verst!"

"No; eagles," said Michael, who understood the slang perfectly; "eagles, do you hear, at 9 copecks a verst and a tip besides."

He was answered by a merry crack of the whip.

In the language of the Russian postillions the "crow" is the stingy or poor traveler who at the posthouses only pays 2 or 3 copecks a verst for the horses. The "eagle" is the traveler who does not mind expense, to say nothing of liberal tips. Therefore the crow could not claim to fly as rapidly as the imperial bird.

Nadia and Michael immediately took their places in the tarantass. A small store of provisions was put in the box,

in case at any time they were delayed in reaching the posthouses, which are very comfortably provided under direction of the state. The hood was pulled up, as it was insupportably hot, and at 12 o'clock the tarantass, drawn by its three horses, left Perm in a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER VI.

IN the afternoon of the 23d of July Michael Strogoff and Nadia were not more than thirty versts from Ichim. Suddenly Michael caught sight of a carriage, scarcely visible among the clouds of dust, preceding them along the road. As his horses were evidently less fatigued than those of the other traveler, he would not be long in overtaking it. This was neither a tarantass nor a telga, but a post berlina, all over dust and looking as if it had made a long journey. The postilion was thrashing his horses with all his might and only kept them at a gallop by dint of abuse and blows. The berlina had certainly not passed through Novo-Sibirsk and could only have struck the Irkutsk road by some less frequented route across the steppe.

Michael's first thought on seeing this berlina was to get in front of it and arrive first at the relay, so as to make sure of fresh horses. He said a word to his driver, who soon brought him up with the berlina.

As he passed a head was thrust out of the window of the berlina.

He had no time to see what it was like, but as he dashed by he distinctly heard this word uttered in an imperious tone:

"Stop!"

But he did not stop. On the contrary, the berlina was soon distanced by the tarantass.

It now became a regular race, for the horses of the berlina, no doubt excited by the sight and pace of the others, recovered their strength and kept up for some minutes. The two carriages were hidden in a cloud of dust. From this cloud issued the cracking of whips, mingled with excited shouts and exclamations of anger.

Nevertheless the advantage remained with Michael, which might be very important to him if the relay were poorly provided with horses. Two carriages were perhaps more than the postmaster could provide for, at least in a short space of time.

Half an hour after the berlina was left far behind, looking only a speck on the horizon on the steppe.

It was 8 o'clock in the evening when Michael and his companion arrived at the posthouse in Ichim.

The news was worse and worse with regard to the invasion.

Here had arrived just a short time before two men.

The one was English, the other French. Both were tall and thin, but the latter was sallow, as are the southern provincials, while the former was ruddy like a Lancashire gentleman. The Anglo-Norman, formal, cold, gave parsimonious gestures and words appearing only to speak or gesture under the influence of a spring opening at regular intervals. The Gaul, on the contrary, was lively and passionate, expressed himself with lips, eyes, hands, all at once, having twenty different ways of explaining his thoughts, whereas his interlocutor seemed to have only one immutably stereotyped on his brain.

The strong contrast they presented would at once have struck the most superficial observer, but a physiognomist, regarding them more closely would have defined their particular characteristics by saying that if the Frenchman was "all eyes," the Englishman was "all ears."

In fact, the visual apparatus of the one had been singularly perfected by practice. The sensibility of his retina must have been as instantaneous as that of those conjurers who recognize a card merely by a rapid movement in cutting the pack or by the arrangement only of marks invisible to others. The Frenchman, indeed, possessed in the highest degree what may be called "the memory of the eye."

The Englishman, on the contrary, appeared especially organized to listen and to hear. When his aural apparatus had been once struck by the sound of a voice, he could not forget it, and after ten or even twenty years he would have recognized it among a thousand. His ears, to be sure, had not the power of moving as freely as those of animals who are provided with large auditory flaps; but, since scientific men know that human ears possess, in fact, a very limited power of movement, we should not be far wrong in affirming that those of the said Englishman became erect and turned in all directions while endeavoring to gather in the sounds in a manner apparent only to the naturalist. It must be observed that this perfection of sight and hearing was of wonderful assistance to these two men in their vocation, for the Englishman acted as correspondent for The Daily Telegraph and the Frenchman as correspondent of the—of what newspaper or of what newspapers he did not say, and when

asked he replied in a jocular manner that he corresponded with "his cousin Madeleine." This Frenchman, however, beneath his careless surface was wonderfully shrewd and sagacious. Even while speaking at random, perhaps the better to hide his desire to learn, he never forgot himself. His loquacity even helped him to conceal his thoughts, and he was perhaps even more discreet than his confere of The Daily Telegraph.

It is needless to say that these two men were devoted to their mission in the world—that they delighted to throw themselves in the track of the most unexpected intelligence; that nothing terrified or discouraged them from succumbing; that they possessed the imperturbable sang froid and the genuine integrity of men of their calling. Enthusiastic jockeys in this steppe race, this hunt after information, they leaped hedges, crossed rivers, sprang over fences with the ardor of pure blooded racers who will run "a good first" or die.

Their journals did not restrict them with regard to money, the surest, the most rapid, the most perfect element of information known to this day. It must also be added, to their honor, that neither the one nor the other ever looked or listened at the walls of private life and that they only exercised their vocation when political or social interests were at stake. In a word, they made what has been for some years called "the great political and military reports."

It will be seen in following them that they had generally an independent mode of viewing events and, above all, their consequences, each having his own way of observing and appreciating. The object to be obtained being of adequate value, they never failed to expend the money required.

The French correspondent was named Alcide Jolivet. Harry Blount was the name of the Englishman. The dissimilarity of their characters, added to a certain amount of jealousy, which generally exists between rivals in the same calling, might have rendered them but little sympathetic. However, they did not avoid one another, but endeavored rather to exchange with each other the news of the day. They were two sportsmen, after all, hunting on the same grounds, in the same preserve. That which one missed might be advantageously secured by the other, and it was to their interest to meet and converse together.

From these two correspondents Michael learned that the town itself was menaced by the Tartar vanguard, and two days before the authorities had been obliged to retreat to Tobolsk. There was not an officer nor a soldier left in Ichim.

On arriving at the relay Michael Strogoff immediately asked for horses.

He had been fortunate in distancing the berlina.

Only three horses were in a fit state to be immediately harnessed. The others had just come in worn out from a long stage.

The postmaster gave the order to put to.

As the two correspondents intended to stop at Ichim, they had not to trouble themselves to find means of transport and therefore had their carriage put away.

In ten minutes Michael was told that his tarantass was ready to start.

"Good," said he.

Then, turning to the two reporters, he said:

"Well, gentlemen, since you remain at Ichim, I wish you success in the prosecution of your mission."

"What, Mr. Korpanoff," said Alcide Jolivet, "shall you not stop even for an hour at Ichim?"

"No, sir, and I also wish to leave the posthouse before the arrival of a berlina which I distanced."

"Are you afraid that the traveler will dispute the horses with you?"

"I particularly wish to avoid any difficulty."

"It is possible that we shall meet you again in a few days at Omsk," added Blount.

"It is possible," answered Michael, "since I am going straight there."

"Well, I wish you a safe journey, Mr. Korpanoff," said Alcide.

Almost immediately the sound of a carriage was heard outside, the door was flung open and a man appeared.

It was the traveler of the berlina, a military looking man, apparently about forty years of age, tall, robust in figure, broad shouldered, with a strongly set head and thick mustache meeting red whiskers. He wore a plain uniform. A cavalry saber hung at his side, and in his hand he held a short handled whip.

"Horses," he demanded, with the air of a man accustomed to command. "I have no more disposable horses," answered the postmaster, bowing.

"It is impossible."

"What are those horses which have just been harnessed to the tarantass I saw at the door?"

"They belong to this traveler," answered the postmaster, pointing to Michael Strogoff.

"Take them out!" said the traveler in a tone which admitted of no reply.

Michael then advanced.

"These horses are engaged by me," he said.

"What does that matter? I must have them. Come, be quick; I have no time to lose."

"I have no time to lose either," replied Michael, endeavoring to be calm, but restraining himself with difficulty.

Nadia was near him, calm also, but secretly uneasy at a scene which it would have been better to avoid.

"Enough!" said the traveler.

Then, going up to the postmaster:

"Let the horses be taken out of the tarantass and put into my berlina," he

exclaimed, with a threatening gesture. "The postmaster, much embarrassed, did not know whom to obey and looked at Michael, who evidently had the right to resist the unjust demands of the traveler."

Michael hesitated an instant. He did not wish to make use of his podorojna, which would have drawn attention to him, and he was most unwilling either by giving up his horses to delay his journey, and yet it was important not to engage in a struggle which might compromise his mission.

The two reporters looked at him, ready to support him should he appeal to them.

"My horses will remain in my carriage," said Michael, but without raising his tone more than would be suitable for a plain Irkutsk merchant.

The traveler advanced toward Michael and laid his hand heavily on his shoulder.

"Is it so?" he said in a rough voice. "You will not give up your horses to me?"

"No," answered Michael. "Very well, then they shall belong to whichever of us is able to start. Defend yourself, for I shall not spare you!"

So saying the traveler drew his saber from its sheath, and Nadia threw herself before Michael.

Blount and Alcide Jolivet advanced toward him.

"I shall not fight," said Michael quietly, folding his arms across his chest. "You will not fight?"

"No."

"Not even after this?" exclaimed the traveler, and before any one could prevent him he struck Michael's shoulder with the handle of the whip. At this insult Michael turned deadly pale. His hands moved convulsively, as if he would have knocked the brute down. But by a tremendous effort he mastered himself. A duel! It was more than a delay; it was perhaps the failure of his mission. It would be better to lose some hours. Yes, but to swallow this affront!

"Will you fight now, coward?" repeated the traveler, adding coarseness to brutality.

"No," answered Michael, without moving, but looking the other straight in the face.

"The horses this moment," said the man and left the room. The postmaster followed him.

The effect produced on the reporters by this incident was not to Michael's advantage. Their discomfiture was visible. How could this strong young man allow himself to be struck like that and not demand satisfaction for such an insult? They contented themselves with bowing to him and retired.

A moment afterward the noise of wheels and the cracking of a whip showed that the berlina, drawn by the tarantass' horses, was driving rapidly away from the posthouse.

Nadia, unmoved, and Michael, still quivering, remained alone in the room. The courier of the czar, his arms crossed over his chest, was seated motionless as a statue. However, a color which could not have been the blush of shame had replaced the paleness on his manly countenance.

Nadia did not doubt that powerful reasons alone could have allowed him to suffer so great a humiliation from such a man.

Then, going up to him as he had come to her in the police station at Nijni Novgorod, she said:

"Your hand, brother."

And at the same time her hand with an almost maternal gesture wiped away a tear which sprung to her companion's eyes.

CHAPTER VII.

NADIA, with the clear perception of a right minded woman, guessed that some secret motive directed all Michael Strogoff's actions; that he for a reason unknown to her did not belong to himself; that he had not the power of doing what he desired, and that in this instance especially he had been specially assigned to duty even his resentment at the gross injury he had received.

Nadia, therefore, asked for explanation from Michael. Had not the hand which she had extended to him already replied to all that he might have been able to tell her?

Michael remained silent all the evening. The postmaster not being able to supply them with fresh horses until the next morning, a whole night must be passed at the house. Nadia could profit by it to take some rest, and a room was therefore prepared for her.

The young girl would no doubt have preferred not to leave her companion, but she felt that he would rather be alone, and she made ready to go to her room.

Just as she was about to retire she could not refrain from going up to Michael to say good night.

"Brother," she whispered.

But he checked her with a gesture. The girl sighed and left the room.

Michael Strogoff did not lie down. He could not have slept even for an hour. The place on which he had been struck by the brutal traveler felt like a burn.

"For my country and the Father," he muttered as he ended his evening prayer.

He especially felt a great wish to know who was the man who had struck him, whence he came and where he was going. As to his face, the features of it were so deeply engraved on his memory that he had no fear of ever forgetting them.

Michael at last asked for the postmaster. The latter, a Siberian of the old type, came directly and, looking rather contemptuously at the young

man, waited to be questioned.

"You belong to the country?" asked Michael.

"Yes."

"Do you know that man who took my horses?"

"No."

"Had you never seen him before?"

"Never."

"Who do you think he was?"

"A man who knows how to make himself obeyed."

Michael fixed his piercing gaze upon the Siberian, but the other did not quail before it.

"Do you dare to judge me?" exclaimed Michael.

"Yes," answered the Siberian, "for there are some things that even a plain merchant cannot receive without returning."

"Blows?"

"Blows, young man. I am of an age and strength to tell you so."

Michael went up to the postmaster and laid his two powerful hands on his shoulders.

Then in a peculiarly calm tone he said:

"Be off, my friend; be off! I could kill you."

The postmaster understood this time. "I like him better for that," he muttered as he retired without adding another word.

At 8 o'clock the next morning, the 24th of July, three strong horses were harnessed to the tarantass. Michael and Nadia took their places, and Ichim, with its disagreeable remembrances, was soon left far behind.

The next day, July 25, at 3 o'clock in the morning, the tarantass arrived at the posthouse in Tionkalsk, having accomplished a distance of 120 versts since it had crossed the Ichim.

They rapidly changed horses. Here, however, for the first time the driver made difficulties about starting, declaring that detachments of Tartars were roving across the steppe and that travelers, horses and carriages would be a fine prize for such robbers.

Only by dint of a large bribe could Michael get over the unwillingness of the driver, for in this instance, as in many others, he did not wish to show his podorojna. The last ukase, having been transmitted by telegraph, was known in the Siberian provinces, and a Russian specially exempted from obeying these orders would certainly have drawn public attention to himself, a thing above all to be avoided by the czar's courier. As to the driver's hesitation, either the rascal traded on the traveler's impatience or he really had good reason to fear some misfortune.

However, at last the tarantass started and made such good way that by 3 in the afternoon it had reached Koulatsinsk, eighty versts farther on. An hour after this it was on the banks of the Irtysh. Omsk was now only twenty versts distant.

The Irtysh is a large river and one of the principal of those which flow toward the north of Asia. Rising in the Atal mountains, it flows from the southeast to the northwest and empties itself into the Obi after a course of nearly 7,000 versts.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

Fights are sometimes thrown, but battles are pitched.—Omaha World Herald.

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