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THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

CHAPTER IX.



It was fortunate that Michael Strogoff had left the post office so promptly. The orders of Ivan Ogareff had been immediately transmitted to all the approaches of the city and a full description of Michael's appearance had been sent to all the various commandants in order to prevent his departure from Omsk. But he had already passed through one of the branches in the fortification. His horse was galloping over the steppe, and not having been immediately pursued, the chances of escape were in his favor.

It was on the 29th of July, at 8 o'clock in the evening, that Michael Strogoff had left Omsk. This town is situated about half way between Moscow and Irkutsk, where it was necessary that he should arrive within ten days if he wished to get ahead of the Tartar columns. It was evident that the unlucky chance which had brought him into the presence of his mother had betrayed his innocent. Ivan Ogareff was no longer ignorant of the fact that a courier of the czar had just passed Omsk, taking the direction of Irkutsk. The dispatches which this courier bore must have been of immense importance. Michael Strogoff knew, therefore, that every effort would be made to capture him.

But what he did not know and could not know was that Marfa Strogoff was in the hands of Ivan Ogareff and that she was about to marry, perhaps with her life, for that natural exhibition of her feelings which she had been unable to restrain when she suddenly found herself in the presence of her son. And it was fortunate that he was ignorant of it. Could he have withstood this fresh trial? Michael Strogoff urged on his horse, hating him with all his own feverish impatience, requiring of him one thing only—namely, to bear him rapidly to the next posting house, where he could be exchanged for a quicker conveyance. At midnight he had cleared seventy versts and halted at the station of Koulikovo. But there, as he feared, he found neither horses nor carriages. Several Tartar detachments had passed along the highway of the steppe. Everything had been stolen or requisitioned both in the villages and in the posting houses. It was with difficulty that Michael Strogoff was even able to obtain some refreshment for his horse and himself.

Michael Strogoff could no longer go in that direction. The horseman advanced rapidly toward the city, and it was difficult for him to escape. Suddenly at the corner of a thicket he saw a house which he might perhaps reach unperceived. To run, to hide himself, to ask and to take there, if need be, something to repair his strength, for he was exhausted with fatigue and hunger, was Michael Strogoff's only resource. He fled then to this shelter, and drawing near, he perceived that it was a telegraph station. Two wires were going east and west, and a third was stretched toward Kalyvan.

One would suppose that under the circumstances that station would have been abandoned, but as it was Michael Strogoff could find there a refuge, wait for the night if need be to travel again across the steppe which was searched by the Tartar pickets. Michael Strogoff hurried toward the door of that house and opened it hastily. A single person was in the room where the dispatches were written. He was an employee, calm, cool, indifferent to all that was going on outside. Faithful to his post, he waited behind his window for the public to claim his services.

Michael Strogoff went to him and with a voice broken by fatigue asked: "What do you know?" "Nothing," answered the employee, smiling. "Are the Russians and Tartars fighting?" "People say so." "But who are the victors?" "I don't know."

So much coolness in the midst of these terrible occurrences, so much indifference even, was hardly possible. "And is not the wire cut?" asked Michael Strogoff. "It is cut between Kalyvan and Krasnopol, but it works yet between Kalyvan and the Russian frontier." "For the government?" "For the government when they think it proper, for the public when they pay. It is 10 copecks a word. I wait your orders, sir."

Michael Strogoff was going to answer that strange operator that he had no dispatch to send; that he wanted only a little bread and water, when suddenly the door of the house was abruptly opened. Michael Strogoff thought the office invaded by the Tartars and was about to jump through the window when he noticed that two men only entered the room and that they were far from being Tartar soldiers.

One of them held a dispatch written in pencil, and, outrunning the other, he was at the window of the stoical employee. In those two men Michael Strogoff was astonished to discover two persons he had thought never to see again. They were the correspondents Harry Blount and Alcide Jolivet, no more traveling companions, but rivals, enemies, now that they were operating on the battlefield. They had left Ichim a few hours only after the departure of Michael Strogoff, and if they arrived before him at Kalyvan in following the same route it was because Michael Strogoff had lost three days on the borders of the Irkutsk. And now, after having witnessed the battle between the Russians and the Tartars in front of the city leaving the city in the struggle was still going on in the streets, they had to run to the station to send away their dispatches to Europe, each seeking to rob the other of priority in describing the stirring events.

Harry Blount. And he went on writing words which he passed to the operator, who read very quietly:

In the beginning God created heaven and earth. They were verses from the Bible Harry Blount was telegraphing to gain time and not give place to his rival. That would probably cost a few thousand rubles to his paper, but his paper would have the first information. France must wait.

Think of the anger of Alcide Jolivet, who under any other circumstances would have appreciated the joke. He even insisted that the operator should take his dispatches in preference to those of the employee.

"That is the right of the gentleman," said the employee coolly, pointing to Harry Blount, smiling kindly to him. And he continued to transmit to the Daily Telegraph the first book of the holy writ.

While he was operating Harry Blount went to the window, and with his glass he observed what was going on about Kalyvan, so as to complete his information.

A few minutes later he took his place again at the office window and added to his telegram:

Two churches in flames. The fire seems to gain on the right. The earth was without form and void. Darkness covered the face of the earth. Alcide Jolivet had simply a ferocious desire to strangle the honorable reporter of the Daily Telegraph.

He once more called upon the employee, who again coolly answered: "It is his right, sir; it is his right. Ten copecks a word." And he telegraphed the following news, handed him by Blount: "Russian refugees escape the city. And God said, 'Let there be light, and there was light.'"

Alcide Jolivet was literally transported with rage. Meanwhile Harry Blount was again at the outside window, but this time, absentminded probably on account of the spectacle he saw, he made his observations too long. So when the operator had finished sending the third verse of the Bible Alcide Jolivet quietly took his place at the wicket and, as his colleague had done, placed a respectable pile of rubles on the desk and handed his dispatch, which the employee read aloud:

Madeleine Jolivet, 10 Faubourg Montmartre, Paris; Kalyvan, Government of Omsk, Aug. 6.—Runaways by the city, Russians beaten. Furious pursuit by the Tartars. And when Harry Blount came back he heard Alcide Jolivet completing his telegram, singing musingly with mockery: "There was a little man all dressed in gray, in Paris."

Alcide Jolivet thought it better not to mix sacred things with profane as his colleague had done, and he answered by a joyful chorus of Beranger to the verses of the Bible.

At that moment a commotion shook the telegraph office. A shell had entered the wall, and a cloud of dust filled the waiting room. Alcide Jolivet was just finishing his verse, "as red as an apple, who, without a penny," but without stopping threw himself on the shell, took it in his hands before it exploded, threw it out of the window and came back to the wicket. It was all done in an instant.

In five seconds the shell burst outside. Then, continuing his telegram with perfect coolness, Alcide Jolivet wrote: "A shell of sixty pounds' weight has burst through the wall of the telegraph office. Expect some others of same caliber."

For Michael Strogoff there was no room to doubt but that the Russians were repulsed from Kalyvan. His last resource was, then, to hasten over the southern plain. But then the general discharge of guns was heard terribly near the telegraph station, and a hailstorm of bullets crashed through the window. Harry Blount, struck on the shoulder, fell. Alcide Jolivet was at that moment about to transmit this supplement to his dispatch:

Harry Blount, reporter of The Daily Telegraph, falls at my side, struck with a piece of bombshell.

But the operator told him with imperturbable coolness: "Sir, the wire is broken." And, leaving his window, he quietly took his hat, which he brushed with his sleeve, and, always smiling, went out through a small door which Michael Strogoff had not before noticed.

The station was then invaded by Tartars, and neither Michael Strogoff nor the journalists were able to effect their retreat. Alcide Jolivet, with his useless dispatch in hand, ran to Harry Blount, stretched on the floor, and, kind hearted as he was, took him on his shoulders with the intention to flee with him. It was too late!

Both were prisoners, and with them Michael Strogoff, taken by surprise when he was about to jump through the window into the hands of the Tartars.

peared to have lost its power beyond the frontiers of the Ural, for a time at least, for the Russians could not fall eventually to defeat the savage hordes of the invaders. But in the meantime the invasion had reached the center of Siberia, and it was spreading through the revolted country both to the east and the western provinces. If the troops of the Amur and the province of Takush did not arrive in time to occupy it, this capital of Asiatic Russia, being immediately garrisoned, would fall into the hands of the Tartars, and before it could be retaken the grand duke, brother of the emperor, would be sacrificed to the vengeance of Ivan Ogareff.

Feofar's camp presented a magnificent spectacle. Numberless tents of silk or silk glistened in the rays of the sun. The lofty plumes which surmounted their conical tops waved amid banners, flags and pennons of every color. The richest of these tents belonged to the Soides and Khodjas, who are the principal personages of the khanate. A special pavilion, ornamented with a horse's tail issuing from a sheaf of red and white sticks artistically interlaced, indicated the high rank of these Tartar chiefs. Then in the distance rose several thousand of the Turcoman tents, which had been carried on the backs of camels.

The camp contained at least a hundred and fifty thousand soldiers, as many foot as horse soldiers, collected under the name of Alamanes. Among them and as the principal types of Turkestan would have been remarked the Tajiks from their regular features, white skin, tall forms and black eyes and hair. They formed the bulk of the Tartar army, and of them the khanates of Khokhand and Koudough had furnished a contingent nearly equal to that of Bokhara. With the Tajiks were mingled specimens of different races who either reside in Turkestan or whose native countries border on it. There were Usbecks, red bearded, small in stature, similar to those who had pursued Michael. Here were Kirghis, with flat faces like the Kalmucks, dressed in coats of mail. Some carried the lance, bows and arrows of Asiatic manufacture, some the saber, a matchlock gun and a little short handled ax, the wounds from which invariably prove fatal. There were Mongols, of middle height, with black hair plaited into pigtails, which hung down their backs, round faces, swarthy complexions, lively deep set eyes, scanty beards, dressed in blue nankeen trimmed with black plush, sword belts of leather with silver buckles, boots gayly braided and silk caps edged with fur and three ribbons fluttering behind. Brown skinned Afghans, too, might have been seen. Arabs, having the primitive type of the beautiful Semitic races, and Turcomans, with eyes which looked as if they had lost the pupil—all enrolled under the emir's flag, the flag of incendiaries and devastators.

When the prisoners were brought into the camp, the emir was in his tent. He did not show himself. This was fortunate no doubt. A sign, a word, from him might have been the signal for some bloody execution. But he entrenched himself in that isolation which constitutes in part the majesty of eastern kings. He who does not show himself is admired and, above all, feared. As to the prisoners, they were to be penned up in some inclosure where, ill treated, poorly fed and exposed to all the inclemencies of the weather, they would await Feofar's pleasure. The most docile and patient of them all was undoubtedly Michael Strogoff. He allowed himself to be led, for they were leading him where he wished to go and under conditions of safety which free he could not have found on the road from Kalyvan to Omsk. To escape before reaching that town was to risk again falling into the hands of the scouts who were scouring the steppe.

At the same time with Michael Strogoff and many other prisoners Harry Blount and Alcide Jolivet had also been taken to the Tartar camp. Their former traveling companion, captured like them at the telegraph office, knew that they were penned up with him in the inclosure, guarded by numerous sentinels, but he did not wish to accost them. It mattered little to him, at this time especially, what they might think of him since the affair at Ichim. Besides, he desired to be alone, that he might act alone if necessary. He therefore held himself aloof from his former acquaintances.

From the moment that Harry Blount had fallen by his side Jolivet had not ceased his attentions to him. During the journey from Kalyvan to the camp—that is to say, for several hours—Blount, by leaning on his companion's arm, had been enabled to follow the rest of the prisoners. He had tried to make known that he was a British subject, but it had no effect on the barbarians, who only replied by prods with a lance or sword. The correspondent of the Daily Telegraph was therefore obliged to submit to the common lot, resolving to protest later and to obtain satisfaction for such treatment. But the journey was not the less disagreeable to him, for his wound caused him much pain, and without Alcide Jolivet's assistance he might never have reached the camp.

Jolivet, whose practical philosophy never abandoned him, had physically and morally strengthened his companion by every means in his power. His first care when they found themselves definitely established in the inclosure was to examine Blount's wound. Having managed to draw off his coat, he found that the shoulder had been only grazed by the shot. "This is nothing," he said; "a mere scratch. After two or three dressings you will be all to rights."

HOME AND CHILD

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"But these dressings?" asked Blount. "I will make them for you myself." "Then you are something of a doctor?"

"All Frenchmen are something of doctors." And on this affirmation Alcide, tearing his handkerchief, made list of one piece, bandages of the other, took some water from a well dug in the middle of the inclosure, bathed the wound, which happily was not serious, and skillfully placed the wet rag on Harry Blount's shoulder.

"I thank you, M. Jolivet," said Harry, stretching himself on a bed of dry leaves which his companion had arranged for him in the shade of a birch tree.

"Now let us talk of what we ought to do. I assure you I have no intention of remaining a prisoner to these Tartars for an indefinite time." "Nor I either."

"We will escape on the first opportunity?" "Yes, if there is no other way of regaining our liberty." "Do you know of any other?" asked Blount, looking at his companion.

"Certainly. We are not belligerents; we are neutral, and we will claim our freedom." "From that brute of a Feofar-Khan?" "No; he would not understand," answered Jolivet; "but from his lieutenant, Ivan Ogareff."

"He is a villain." "No doubt, but the villain is a Russian. He knows that it does not do to trifle with the rights of men, and he has no interest to retain us. On the contrary. But to ask a favor of that gentleman does not quite suit my taste."

"But that gentleman is not in the camp, or at least I have not seen him here," observed Blount. "He will come. He will not fail to do that. He must join the emir. Siberia is cut in two now, and very certainly Feofar's army is only waiting for him to advance on Irkutsk."

"And, once free, what shall we do?" "Once free, we will continue our campaign and follow the Tartars until the time comes when we can make our way into the Russian camp. We must not give up the game. No, indeed; we have only just begun."

The event so much wished for by Jolivet and Blount, so much dreaded by Michael, occurred on the morning of the 12th of August. On that day the trumpets sounded, the drums beat, the cannon roared. A huge cloud of dust swept along the road from Kalyvan. Ivan Ogareff, followed by several thousand men, made his entry into the Tartar camp.

At the first flourish of the trumpets several officers of high rank, followed by a brilliant escort of Usbeck horsemen, moved to the front of the camp to receive Ivan Ogareff. Arrived in his presence, they paid him the greatest respect and invited him to accompany them to Feofar-Khan's tent. Imperturbable as usual, Ogareff replied coldly to the deference paid to him. He was plainly dressed, but from a sort of impudent bravado he still wore the uniform of a Russian officer.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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