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THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

[CONTINUED.]

A circumstance altogether unnatural was the cause, from his arrival at Irkutsk, of there being frequent relations between Ivan Ogareff and one of its bravest defenders, Wassili Feodor. One knows with what anxiety this unhappy father was devoured. If his daughter, Nadia Feodor, had left Russia at the date assigned by the last letter he had received from Riga, what had become of her? Was she still trying to traverse the invaded provinces, or, rather, had she already been for a long time a prisoner? Wassili Feodor could not find any solace for his sorrow except when he had some opportunity of lighting against the Tartars, opportunities which were too seldom for his liking. Now, when Wassili Feodor was informed of the unexpected arrival of a courier from the czar he had a presentiment that this courier could give him some tidings of his daughter. It was only a very slight hope, but still he clung to it.

Wassili Feodor went to find Ivan Ogareff, who availed himself of this opportunity to have daily relations with the commandant. Did the renegade think he could turn that circumstance to his own profit? Did he judge all men by himself? Could he believe that a Russian, even a political exile, could be so mean as to betray his country? Whatever was the case, Ivan Ogareff met with skillfully feigned eagerness all the advances made to him by the father of Nadia. The latter, the very next morning after the arrival of the pretended courier, went to the palace of the governor general. There he informed Ivan Ogareff of the circumstances under which his daughter had to leave European Russia and told him now what was his anxiety in her regard.

Ivan Ogareff did not know Nadia, although he had met her at the post-house of Ichim the day on which she was there with Michael Strogoff. But then he had paid no more attention to her than the two journalists, who were at the same time in the posthouse. He could not therefore give any news of his daughter to Wassili Feodor.

"But at what time," asked Ivan Ogareff, "had your daughter to leave Russian territory?"

"At nearly the same time as you," replied Wassili Feodor.

"I quitted Moscow on the 15th of July."

"And Nadia also had to leave Moscow on that date. Her letter told me so expressly."

"She was at Moscow on the 15th of July?" asked Ivan Ogareff.

"Yes, certainly at that date."

"Very well," replied Ivan Ogareff. Then, recollecting himself, he added: "But, no; I was forgetting. I was about to confound dates. It is unfortunately too probable that your daughter has had to cross the frontier, and only one hope remains—that she may have stopped on receiving news of the Tartar invasion!"

Wassili Feodor hung down his head. He knew Nadia, and he knew well that nothing would prevent her setting off. By this statement Ivan Ogareff had just committed gratuitously an act of real cruelty. With one word he could reassure Wassili Feodor.

Although Nadia had passed the frontier under the circumstances previously described, Wassili Feodor, by comparing the date at which his daughter was certainly at Nijni Novgorod and the date of the order forbidding any one to leave it, would without doubt draw this conclusion—that Nadia could not have been exposed to the dangers of an invasion and that she was still, in spite of herself, on the European territory of the empire.

Ivan Ogareff might have said that word. He did not say it. Wassili Feodor withdrew heartbroken. After that interview his last hope was destroyed.

During the two following days the grand duke several times asked for the pretended Michael Strogoff and had him repeat all that he had heard in the imperial cabinet of the New Palace. Ivan Ogareff, prepared for all those questions, answered without ever hesitating. He did not conceal designedly that the government of the czar had been altogether taken by surprise by the invasion; that the rising had been prepared with the greatest secrecy; that the Tartars were already masters of the line of the Obi when the news reached Moscow, and finally that nothing was ready in the Russian provinces to throw into Siberia troops sufficient to repel the invaders.

Afterward Ivan Ogareff, entirely free in his movements, began to study Irkutsk, the state of its fortifications, their weak points, in order eventually to make use of those observations if any circumstance should prevent the consummation of his treason. He devoted himself more particularly to the examination of the Bolchaia gate, which he intended treacherously to surrender. Twice at night he came to inspect that gate and the fortifications around it. He walked about there without any fear of exposing himself to the missiles of the besiegers, whose first posts were less than a verst from the ramparts. He knew well that he was

not exposed—nay, even that he was recognized. He had had a glimpse of a shadow which had glided to the foot of the ramparts.

Sangarre, risking her life, had just come to try to put herself in communication with Ivan Ogareff. Besides, the besieged for two days had enjoyed a tranquillity to which they had not been accustomed since the Tartars first invested Irkutsk. It was by order of Ivan Ogareff.

The lieutenant of Feofar-Khan had wished that all attempts to carry the town by sheer force should be suspended. Thus after his arrival at Irkutsk the artillery was absolutely silent. Perhaps—at least he hoped so—the vigilance of the besieged would be somewhat relaxed. In any case, at the outpost several thousand Tartars were ready to hurl themselves against the gate when deprived of its defenders, when Ivan Ogareff should let them know the hour for action.

Meanwhile that could not be long delayed. They must make an end of it before the Russian corps should arrive in sight of Irkutsk. The resolution of Ivan Ogareff was taken, and that very night from the top of the rampart a note fell into the hands of Sangarre. It was the following night, the night from the 5th to the 6th of October, at 2 o'clock in the morning, that Ivan Ogareff had fixed for delivering up Irkutsk to the Tartars.

CHAPTER XIX. THE plans of Ivan Ogareff had been laid with the greatest care and, unless some unlikely circumstance should occur, they must succeed. It was necessary that the Bolchaia gate should be without defenders at the moment when he should deliver it up to the Tartars. Thus at that moment it would be indispensable that the attention of the besieged should be drawn to another point of the city; hence a diversion agreed upon with the emir. That diversion had to take place along the suburbs of Irkutsk, up and down the right bank of the river.

The attack on those two points would be made very earnestly and at the same time a feigned attempt to cross the Angara on its left bank. The Bolchaia gate would then be probably abandoned, especially as on that side the advance posts, which were said to be at some distance off, would seem to have been collected together.

The fifth day of October had come. Before twenty-four hours the capital of eastern Siberia ought to be in the hands of the emir and the grand duke in the power of Ivan Ogareff. During all that day an unusual movement was taking place in the camp of the Angara. From the windows of the palace and from the houses of the right bank one could see distinctly that important preparations were being made on the opposite heights.

Numerous Tartar detachments were seen moving toward the camp and thus hourly re-enforcing the troops of the emir. This was the preparation for the diversion which had been agreed upon, and it was being made in the most ostentatious manner. Moreover, Ivan Ogareff did not conceal from the grand duke that some attack was to be feared on that side. He knew, he said, that an assault would be made at the two extremities of the town along the river, and he counseled the grand duke to re-enforce those two points more directly menaced.

The preparations that had been noticed, coming to the support of Ivan Ogareff's recommendations, it was necessary to take some account of them. Thus after a council of war which was held at the palace orders were given to concentrate the defense on the right bank of the Angara and at the two extremities of the town, where the fortified terraces rested on the river.

This was precisely what Ivan Ogareff wished. He evidently did not reckon on that the Bolchaia gate would remain without defenders, but they would be there only in a small number. Besides, Ivan Ogareff was about to give to the diversion such importance that the grand duke would be obliged to oppose it with all his disposable forces.

And indeed an incident of an exceptional gravity, devised by Ivan Ogareff, was to powerfully aid in the accomplishment of his projects. For even if Irkutsk had not been attacked at points distant from the Bolchaia gate and along the right bank of the river that incident would have sufficed to draw the chief body of the defenders to the place where Ivan Ogareff wished precisely to bring them. It would cause at the same time a most terrible catastrophe.

All the chances were then that the gate, being free at the hour fixed, would be given up to the thousands of Tartars who were waiting under the thick cover of the forest on the east. During that day the garrison and population of Irkutsk were constantly on the alert. All the measures which were required to repel an attack on points never before threatened were taken.

The grand duke and General Voronoff visited the various posts which had

been strengthened by their orders. The picked corps of Wassili Feodor occupied the north of the town, but with the injunction to march at once to where the danger should be most pressing. The right bank of the Angara was protected by the only artillery at their disposal.

With these measures taken in time, thanks to the opportune recommendations of Ivan Ogareff, there was every reason to hope that the prepared attack would not succeed. In that case the Tartars, discouraged for the time, without doubt would defer for a few days any new attack against the town. Besides, the troops expected by the grand duke might arrive any hour. The safety or the loss of Irkutsk hung on a thread.

On that day the sun, which had risen at twenty minutes past 6, had set at 5:40. Twilight would still have to struggle with night for two hours. Then space would be filled with thick darkness, for heavy clouds hung still in the air, and the moon would not appear. This profound obscurity would favor more completely the plans of Ivan Ogareff.

Already, for some days, an extremely keen frost had come as a prelude to the rigors of the Siberian winter, and on that night the cold was still more piercing. The soldiers posted on the right bank of the Angara, being forced to hide their presence, had not kindled any fires. They therefore suffered dreadfully from great lowering of the temperature. At some feet below them the ice blocks floated past, following the current of the river.

During all that day they had seen them in close ranks floating rapidly between the two banks. That circumstance, observed by the grand duke and his officers, had been considered as fortunate. It was evident that if the bed of the river became obstructed the passage of it would become altogether impracticable.

The Tartars would not be able to manage either rafts or boats. As to attempting to cross the river over the blocks of ice when the cold should have joined them, that was not possible. The field, newly cemented, would not have been strong enough for the passage over it of an attacking column.

But Ivan Ogareff did not regret that circumstance, although it appeared favorable to the defenders of Irkutsk, for the traitor knew well that the Tartars were not seeking to cross the Angara and that at least on that side the attempt would only be a feint. Nevertheless toward 10 o'clock at night the state of the river visibly changed, to the extreme surprise of the besieged and now to their disadvantage. The passage, up to that time impracticable, suddenly became possible. The bed of the Angara soon became free. The floating ice, which for some days had come down the river in great quantities, disappeared, and very little could be seen between the two banks.

The Russian officers, who had noticed this change in the state of the river, made it known to the grand duke. Besides, it was explained in this way that at some narrow portion of the Angara the floating ice had accumulated and found a barrier. We know that such was the case. The passage of the Angara was therefore open to the besiegers; hence the necessity for the Russians to watch with greater attention than ever.

In the camp of the Angara there was plenty of agitation, as was proved by the lights constantly flitting about. At a verst up above, as also down below the point where the fortification slopes down to the river, there was a dull murmur, which proved that the Tartars were on foot, waiting for some signal. Again an hour passed by. Nothing new.

Two o'clock in the morning was about to strike from the clock tower of the cathedral of Irkutsk and no movement had taken place to disclose the hostile intentions of the besiegers. The grand duke and his officers began to ask themselves if they had not been led into error, if it had really entered into the plan of the Tartars to attempt to surprise the town.

The preceding nights had not by any means been so calm. Firing had been kept up from the advanced posts, and shells had passed through the air, and this time there was nothing of the kind. The grand duke, General Voronoff, their aids-de-camp, waited therefore, ready to give their orders according to the circumstances.

It has been stated that Ivan Ogareff occupied a room in the palace. It was a pretty large room, situated on the ground floor, and its windows opened out upon a side terrace. One need only step a few paces on this terrace to overlook the course of the Angara. A profound darkness reigned in that room. Ivan Ogareff, standing near a window, was waiting for the hour of

action to arrive. Evidently the signal could only come from him. Once this signal was given, when most of the defenders of Irkutsk should have been called to the points openly attacked, his plan was to leave the palace and to go and accomplish his work. He waited then in the dark, like a tiger ready to spring upon its prey.

Meanwhile, some minutes before 2 o'clock, the grand duke asked that Michael Strogoff—it was the only name he could give to Ivan Ogareff—should be brought to him. An aid-de-camp came to his room, the door of which was closed. He called him. Ivan Ogareff, motionless near the window and invisible in the darkness, took good care not to answer. The grand duke was then informed that the courier of the czar was not at that moment in the palace.

Two o'clock struck. It was the moment that action had been agreed on with the Tartars, who were ready for the assault. Ivan Ogareff opened the window of his room and placed himself at the north angle of the side terrace. Below him in the shade flowed the waters of the Angara, which roared as they broke against the piles of the buttresses.

Ivan Ogareff drew a flint from his pocket and lit with it a piece of cotton wool impregnated with priming powder, which he threw into the river. It was by the order of Ivan Ogareff that torrents of mineral oil had been cast on the surface of the Angara. Springs of naphtha had been discovered above Irkutsk on the right bank, between the village of Poshkavsk and the town.

Ivan Ogareff had resolved to employ this terrible means for setting fire to Irkutsk. He therefore made use of the immense reservoir which contained the combustible liquid. He had only to make a few canals to draw in streams into the river. These he had made that very night, some hours before. The cotton wool had been cast on the waters of the Angara. In an instant as if the current had been made of alcohol, all the river became a mass of flames, up and down the stream, with the rapidity of electricity. Volumes of blue flames covered the whole surface of the river and shot far into the sky.

The few blocks of ice that came floating down the river, being seized by the burning liquid, melted like wax on the surface of a furnace, and the water, set off as vapor, rose hissing to the clouds. At that very moment the firing began at the north and at the south of the town. The batteries of the camp of the Angara threw an uninterrupted volley of shot and shell. Many thousand Tartars rushed to the assault of the ramparts. The houses along the high banks, constructed of wood, took fire in every direction. An immense light dissipated the shades of night.

"At last!" said Ivan Ogareff. And he had good reason to applaud. The diversion which he had planned was terrible. The defenders saw themselves placed between the attack of the Tartars and the disasters of an immense conflagration. The bells sounded, and every able-bodied man of the population hastened to the points attacked and to the houses which were being devoured by the fire, which was threatening to communicate itself to the whole city. The Bolchaia gate was almost free. It was with difficulty that any defenders had been left there.

Ivan Ogareff re-entered his room, then brilliantly lit up by the flames from the Angara that overtopped the balustrades of the ramparts. Then he prepared to leave it. But scarcely had he opened the door when a woman rushed into the room, with her garments dripping wet, her hair in disorder.

"Sangarre!" cried Ivan Ogareff in the first moment of surprise and not imagining that it could be any other woman than the gypsy.

It was not Sangarre; it was Nadia. At the moment when, seeking refuge on the block of ice, the young girl had uttered that cry when she saw the fire spread over the current of the Angara, Michael Strogoff had seized her in his arms, and he had dived with her to seek even in the depths of the river a shelter from the flames. After having swum under the waters Michael Strogoff had fortunately put his foot on ground at the quay, and he had Nadia still safe with him.

Michael Strogoff was touching at last his goal. He was at Irkutsk. "To the palace of the governor!" said he to Nadia. In less than ten minutes afterward both arrived at the entrance to that palace, the massive stone walls of which were being licked by the long flames from the Angara, without, however, their being able to set the structure on fire. Beyond the houses on the bank were all in flames.

Michael Strogoff and Nadia entered without difficulty into that palace, which was open for all. In the midst of the general confusion no one noticed them, although their clothes were dripping wet. A crowd of officers came for orders, and soldiers running to execute them blocked up the grand salon on the ground floor.

There Michael Strogoff and the young girl, in the midst of so great a crowd, found themselves separated from each other. Nadia, distracted, ran along the lower rooms, called her companion and asked to be led before the grand duke. A door leading into a room that was inundated with light opened itself before her. She entered, and she found herself unexpectedly face to face with him whom she had seen at Ichim, whom she had seen at Tomsk, in the presence of that man whose cursed hand an instant later would have delivered up the city.

"Ivan Ogareff!" cried she. On hearing his name pronounced the miserable wretch trembled. His true name being once known, all his plans

would be ruined. He had only one thing to do—to kill the being, whoever it might be, who had just pronounced it. Ivan Ogareff threw himself on Nadia, but the young girl, with a knife in her hand, placed her back to the wall, resolved to defend herself.

"Ivan Ogareff!" cried again Nadia, knowing well that detested name would bring succor to her.

"Ah, you shall be silent!" said the traitor.

"Ivan Ogareff!" cried a third time the intrepid young girl in a voice whose hate had increased tenfold the force.

Drunk with fury, Ivan Ogareff drew a dagger from his belt, rushed upon Nadia and forced her back into a corner of the room. It was all over with her when the wretch, suddenly knocked down by a tremendous blow, rolled to the ground.

"Michael!" cried Nadia.

It was Michael Strogoff. Michael Strogoff had heard the appeal of Nadia. Guided by her voice, he had arrived at the room of Ivan Ogareff, and he had entered by the door which had been left open.

"Fear nothing, Nadia," he said as he placed himself between her and Ivan Ogareff.

"Ah," screamed the young girl, "take care, brother! The traitor is armed! He can see well!"

Ivan Ogareff had risen, and, believing that he had the advantage over a blind man, he threw himself upon Michael Strogoff. But with one hand Michael seized the arm of the other, turning aside his weapon, he threw him a second time to the ground.

Ivan Ogareff, pale with fury and shame, remembered that he was carrying a sword. He drew it from the scabbard and returned to the combat. He had also recognized Michael Strogoff. A blind man! He had only, in short, to deal with a blind man.

Nadia, terrified at the danger which threatened her companion in such an unequal struggle, ran to the door, calling help.

"Shut that door, Nadia," said Michael Strogoff. "Do not call any one, and let me do it. The courier of the czar has nothing to fear today from this wretch. Let him come at me if he dare. I am waiting for him."

Meanwhile Ivan Ogareff, gathering himself together, as it were, like a tiger did not utter a word. The noise of his step, his very breathing, he would have wished to keep back from the ear of the blind man. He wished to strike him before even he had any warning of his approach, to strike him with a certain blow. The traitor did not dream of fighting, but of assassinating him whose name he had stolen.

Nadia, frightened, yet at the same time confident, contemplated with a sort of admiration that terrible scene. It seemed that the old coolness had come back to him.

Michael Strogoff had as his only weapon his Siberian knife, and he could not see his adversary, who was even armed with a sword. But by what favor from heaven was he able to overpower him?

Ivan Ogareff glanced at his adversary with a visible anxiety. That superb calmness worked upon him. In vain, appealing to his reason, he kept saying that in the inequality of such a combat all the advantage was in his favor. That immovableness of the blind man completely froze him. He had sought with his eyes the place where he must strike his victim. He had found it. Who, then, was preventing him from giving the finishing blow? At length he made a blow and thrust his sword full at the breast of Michael Strogoff.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

And He Felt Injured.

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