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THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

[CONTINUED.]

An imperceptible movement of the knife of the blind man turned the blow. Michael Strogoff had not been touched and coolly seemed to wait another attack without, however, challenging it.

A cold sweat ran from the face of Ivan Ogareff. He recoiled a pace, then made another thrust. But the second blow, like the first, fell harmless. A simple parrying with the large knife had sufficed to turn aside the sword of the traitor. The latter, mad with rage and terror before that living statue, fixed his terrified look on the large open eyes of the blind man. Those eyes that seemed to read the very bottom of his heart and which could not see—those eyes seemed to have for him an awful fascination.

Suddenly Ivan Ogareff gave a cry. An unexpected light had entered his brain.

"He can see!" cried he. "He can see!"

And, like a deer trying to re-enter its cave, step by step, terrified, he retreated to the lower end of the room. Then the statue took life. The blind man walked straight to Ivan Ogareff, and, placing himself in front of him, said: "Yes, I see—I see the blow of the knout with which I have marked you, traitor and coward! I see the place where I am going to strike you. Defend your life! It is a duel which I condescend to offer you. My knife will suffice me against your sword!"

"He sees!" said Nadia. "God of mercy, is it possible?"

Ivan Ogareff felt himself to be lost. But suddenly, taking courage, sword in hand, he rushed upon his impassible adversary. The two blades crossed, but at the first clash of the knife of Michael Strogoff, grasped firmly in the hand of the Siberian hunter, the sword flew in pieces, and the wretch, pierced to the heart, fell dead to the ground.

At that moment the door of the room, pushed from the outside, opened. The grand duke, accompanied by some officers, showed himself on the threshold. The grand duke advanced. He recognized on the ground the dead body of him whom he thought to be the courier of the czar, and then in a threatening voice he asked:

"Who has slain this man?" "I," replied Michael Strogoff. "One of the officers placed a revolver to his head, ready to fire." "Your name?" asked the grand duke before giving the order to shoot him dead.

"Your highness," answered Michael Strogoff, "ask me rather the name of the man stretched at your feet." "That man I have recognized. He is a servant of my brother. He is the czar's courier." "That man, your highness, is not a courier from the czar. He is Ivan Ogareff!" "Ivan Ogareff!" cried the grand duke. "Yes; Ivan the traitor." "But you—who are you?" "Michael Strogoff."

CHAPTER XX. MICHAEL STROGOFF was not, had never been, blind. A purely human phenomenon, at once moral and physical, had neutralized the action of the red-hot blade which the executioner of Feofar had passed over his eyes. One remembers that at the moment of that terrible punishment Marfa Strogoff was there, stretching out her hands toward her son.

Michael Strogoff looked at her, as a son can look at his mother when it is for the last time. Streams of tears welled up from his heart to his eyes, which his high spirit tried in vain to restrain and, filling the sockets of his eyes, had thus saved his sight. The action of the heat had been destroyed just in the same manner as when a smelter, after having plunged his hand into water, thrusts it with impunity into molten iron.

Michael Strogoff had at once understood the danger he would have run in making known his secret to any one. He realized the advantages which he might gain from this situation for the accomplishment of his projects. It is because they would believe him to be blind that they would leave him his liberty.

It was necessary, then, that he should be blind, that he should be so for all, even for Nadia—in short, that he should be so everywhere and that not a gesture at any moment could cause any doubt of the sincerity of his role. His resolution was taken. Even his very life must be risked in order to give to all the proof of his blindness, and one knows how he risked it.

His mother alone knew the truth, and it was on the square of Tomsk that he had whispered it in her ear when, bending over her in the shade, he had covered her with his kisses. We can now understand how when Ivan Ogareff had placed the emperor's letter before his eyes, which he believed to be blind, Michael Strogoff had been able to read, had read that letter which disclosed the hateful designs of

the traitor; hence that energy which he displayed during the second part of the journey; hence that unchanging will to reach Irkutsk and on arriving there to fulfill with his own voice his mission. He knew that the town was to be given up by the traitor. He knew that the life of the grand duke was threatened. The safety of the brother of the czar and of Siberia was still in his hands.

In a few words all this history was recounted to the grand duke, and Michael Strogoff told also, and with what emotion, the part which Nadia had taken in these events.

"Who is this young girl?" asked the grand duke.

"The daughter of the exiled Wassili Feodor," answered Michael Strogoff.

"The daughter of Commander Feodor," said the grand duke, "has ceased to be the daughter of an exile. There are no more exiles at Irkutsk."

Nadia, less strong in joy than she had been in sorrow, fell at the feet of the grand duke, who raised her with one hand, while he held out the other to Michael Strogoff. An hour afterward Nadia was in the arms of her father.

Michael Strogoff, Nadia, Wassili Feodor, were reunited. It was on all sides complete happiness.

The Tartars had been repulsed in their double attack upon the town. Wassili Feodor, with his little troop, had crushed the first assailants who had presented themselves at the Bolchaia gate with the expectation of finding it open.

At the same time that the Tartars were driven back the besieged had rendered themselves masters of the fire. Before daybreak the troops of Feofar-Khan had returned to their encampments, leaving a good number of dead under the ramparts.

Among the dead was the gypsy Sangarbo, who had tried in vain to rejoin Ivan Ogareff.

For two days the besiegers attempted no new assault. They were discouraged by the death of Ivan Ogareff. That man was the soul of the invasion, and he alone, by his long continued plots, had sufficient influence over the khans and their hordes to be able to lead them to the conquest of Asiatic Russia.

Meanwhile the defenders of Irkutsk had held themselves on their guard, and the investment continued, but on the 7th of October from the first streaks of day the boom of cannon resounded on the heights around Irkutsk. It was the relieving army which had arrived under the orders of General Kissely, who thus signaled his presence to the grand duke.

The Tartars did not stay any longer. They did not wish to risk a battle under the walls of Irkutsk. The camp of the Angara was immediately raised. Irkutsk was at last delivered.

With the first Russian soldiers two friends of Michael Strogoff had entered the town. They were the inseparable Blount and Jolivet. By gaining the right bank of the Angara along the barrier of ice they and the other fugitives had been able to escape before the flames of the Angara had reached the raft. This had been put down by Aleide Jolivet in his notebook and in this manner: "Was near ending like a lemon in a bowl of punch!"

Their joy was great to once more find Nadia and Michael Strogoff safe and sound, especially when they learned that their brave companion was not blind, a statement which led Harry Blount to jot down this observation: "A red-hot iron is perhaps insufficient to destroy the sensibility of the optic nerve. To be modified."

Afterward the two correspondents, well installed in Irkutsk, occupied themselves in putting in order the impressions of their journey. From thence two interesting chronicles of the Tartar invasion were sent to London and Paris, which, strange to say, only contradicted each other on points of less moment.

ing us together, in allowing us to pass through these great trials together, has wished us to be united forever.

"Ah!" said Nadia as she fell into the arms of Michael Strogoff, and, turning toward Wassili Feodor. "My father," she said, blushing deeply.

"Nadia," said Wassili Feodor, "my joy will be to call you both my children!"

The marriage ceremony took place in the cathedral of Irkutsk. It was very simple in its preparations, but very beautiful in the concourse of the military and civil population, which thus wished to show its gratitude to the young couple, whose strange journey had now become legendary.

Aleide Jolivet and Harry Blount of course assisted at the marriage, of which they wished to give an account to their readers.

"And does it not make you envious to imitate them?" asked Aleide Jolivet to the companion.

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Harry Blount. "If, like you, I had a cousin!"

"My cousin is not any longer marriageable," laughingly answered Aleide Jolivet.

"All the better," added Harry Blount, "for they speak of difficulties which are about to arise between London and Peking."

"Would you not like to see what is passing there?"

"Why, my dear Blount," cried Aleide Jolivet, "I was about to propose it to you!"

This is how the two inseparables set out for China.

Some days after the ceremony Michael and Nadia Strogoff, accompanied by Wassili Feodor, started on their journey to Europe. That road of sorrows was only one of happiness on their return. They traveled very rapidly with one of those trains which glide like an express over the frozen steppes of Siberia.

Meanwhile, arrived at the banks of the Dinka, just opposite Briskoe, they stopped there one day. Michael Strogoff sought out the place where he had interred poor Nicholas. A cross was planted there, and Nadia prayed for the last time on the tomb of the humble and heroic soul which neither the one nor the other would ever forget.

At Omsk old Marfa was awaiting them in the little house of the Strogoffs. She pressed in her arms that noble girl whom in her heart she had already a hundred times called her daughter. The brave Siberian on that day had the right to own her son and to say that she was proud of him.

After some days passed at Omsk, Michael and Nadia Strogoff returned to Europe, and, Wassili Feodor being well fixed in St. Petersburg, neither his son nor his daughter had any occasion ever to leave him, only when they went to see their old mother.

THE DRUMS OF THE FORE AND AFT.

By RUDYARD KIPLING.

"Very how much?" "Very close veins, sir. That's why they swell after long parade, sir. It's can go, we can go, sir."

Again the colonel looked at them long and intently.

"Yes, the band is going," he said as gravely as though he had been addressing a brother officer. "Have you any parents, either of you two?"

"No, sir," rejoicingly from Lew and Jakin. "We're both orphans, sir. There's no one to be considered of on our account, sir."

"You poor little sprats. And you want to go up to the front with the regiment, do you? Why?"

"I've wore the queen's uniform for two years," said Jakin. "It's very hard, sir, that a man don't get no recompense for doin' 'is dooty, sir."

"An—an if I don't go, sir," interrupted Lew. "The bandmaster 'e says 'e'll catch an make a bloo—a blessed musician o' me, sir. Before I've seen any service, sir."

The colonel made no answer for a long time. Then he said quietly: "If you're passed by the doctor, I dare say you can go. I shouldn't smoke if I were you."

The boys saluted and disappeared. The colonel walked home and told the story to his wife, who nearly cried over it. The colonel was well pleased. If that was the temper of the children, what would not the men do?

Jakin and Lew entered the boys' barrack room with great stateliness and refused to hold any conversation with their comrades for at least ten minutes. Then, bursting with pride, Jakin drawled: "I've bin intervooin' the colonel. Good old beggar 'e is the colonel. Says I to 'im, 'Colonel,' says I, 'let me go to the front along o' the regiment.' 'To the front you shall go,' says 'e. 'an I only wish there was more like you among the dirty little devils that bang the bloomin' drums.' Kidd, if you throw your 'contumacious' at me for tellin' you the truth to your own advantage your legs'll swell."

None the less, there was a battle royal in the barrack room, for the boys were consumed with envy and hate, and neither Jakin nor Lew behaved in conciliatory wise.

"I'm goin' out to say adoo to my girl," said Lew to cap the climax. "Don't none o' you touch my kit, because it's wanted for active service, me bein' specially invited to go by the colonel."

He strolled forth and whistled in the clump of trees at the back of the married quarters till Cris came to him, and, the preliminary kisses being given and taken, Lew began to explain the situation.

"I'm goin' to the front with the regiment," he said valiantly.

"Piggy, you're a little liar," said Cris, but her heart misgave her, for Lew was not in the habit of lying.

surplus returning to the ranks. Jakin and Lew were attached to the band as supernumeraries, though they would much have preferred being company buglers.

"Don't matter much," said Jakin after the medical inspection. "Be thankful that we're 'lowed to go at all. The doctor 'e said that if we could stand what we took from the bazaar sergeant's son we'd stand pretty nigh anything."

"Which we will," said Lew, looking tenderly at the ragged and ill made housewife that Cris had given him with a lock of her hair worked into a sprawling 'L' upon her cover."

"I wouldn't let mother nor the sergeant's tailor 'elp me. Keep it always Piggy, an remember I love you true."

They marched to the railway station 960 strong, and every soul in campaments turned out to see them go. The drummers gnashed their teeth at Jakin and Lew marching with the band, the married women wept upon the platform, and the regiment cheered its noble self black in the face.

"A nice level lot," said the colonel to the second in command as they watched the first four companies entering.

"Fit to do anything," said the second in command enthusiastically. "But it seems to me they're a thought too young and tender for the work in hand. It's bitter cold up at the front now."

"They're sound enough," said the colonel. "We must take our chance of sick casualties."

So they went northward, ever northward, past droves and droves of camels, armies of camp followers and legions of laden mules, the throng thickening day by day, till with a shriek the train pulled up at a hopelessly congested junction where six lines of temporary track accommodated six or seven hundred trains; where whistles blew, Babes weaned and commissariat officers swore from dawn till far into the night amid the wind driven chaff of the fodder bales and the lowing of a thousand steers.

"Hurry up! You're badly wanted at the front," was the message that greeted the Fore and Aft, and the occupants of the Red Cross carriages told the same tale.

"Tisn't so much the bloom in fightin'," gasped a head banded trooper of hussars to a knot of admiring Fore and Afts. "Tisn't so much the bloom in fightin', though there's enough o' that. It's the bloom in food an the bloom in climate. Frost all night 'cept when it hails an b'lin sun all day, an the water stinks fit to knock you down. I got my 'ed chipped like an egg. I've got pneumonia, too, an my guts is all out o' order. 'Tain't no bloom in picnic in those parts, I can tell you."

"'Wot are the niggers like?" demanded a private.

"There's some prisoners in that train yonder. Go an look at 'em. They're the aristocracy o' the country. The common folk are a dashed sight uglier. If you want to know what they fight with, reach under my seat an pull out the long knife that's there."

They dragged out and beheld for the first time the grim, bone handled, triangular Afghan knife. It was almost as long as Lew.

"That's the thing to j'nt you," said the trooper feebly.

"It can take off a man's arm at the shoulder as easy as slicing butter. I halved the beggar that used that un, but there's more o' his likes up above. They don't understand thrustin, but they're devils to slice."

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