

THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

CHAPTER I.

"SIRE, a fresh dispatch."
"Whence?"
"From Tomsk."
"Is the wire cut beyond that city?"
"Yes, sire, since yesterday."
"Telegraph hourly to Tomsk, general, and let me be kept informed of all that occurs."
"Sire, it shall be done," answered General Kissoff.

These words were exchanged about two hours after midnight, at the moment when the fête given at the New palace was at the height of its splendor.

An hour later General Kissoff, who had just re-entered, quickly approached his majesty.

"Well?" asked the latter abruptly, as he had done the former time.

"Telegrams reach Tomsk no longer, sire."

"A courier this moment?" And, leaving the hall, his majesty entered a large antechamber adjoining.

The czar had not so suddenly left the ballroom of the New palace when the fête he was giving to the civil and military authorities and principal people of Moscow was at the height of its brilliancy without ample cause, for he had just received information that serious events were taking place beyond the frontiers of the Ural. It had become evident that a formidable rebellion threatened to wrest the Siberian provinces from the Russian crown.

Asiatic Russia, or Siberia, covers a superficial area of 1,700,000 square miles and contains nearly 2,000,000 of inhabitants. Extending from the Ural mountains, which separate it from Russia in Europe, to the shores of the Pacific ocean, it is bounded on the south by Turkistan and the Chinese empire, on the north by the Arctic ocean, from the sea of Kara to Bering strait. It is divided into several governments or provinces, those of Tobolsk, Yeniseisk, Irkutsk, Omsk and Yakutsk; contains two districts, Okhotsk and Kamchatka, and possesses two countries, now under the Muscovite dominion—that of the Kirghiz and that of the Tshovkishes.

Two governor-generals represent the supreme authority of the czar over this vast country. One resided at Irkutsk, the capital of western Siberia. The river Tchouana, a tributary of the Yenisei, separates the two Siberias.

No rail yet furrows these wide plains, some of which are in reality extremely fertile. No iron ways lead from these precious mines which make the Siberian soil far richer below than above its surface. The traveler journeys in summer in a kibick or toiga; in winter, in a sledge.

An electric telegraph, with a single wire more than 8,000 versts in length, alone affords communication between the western and eastern frontiers of Siberia. On issuing from the Ural it passes through Ekaterenburg, Kasimov, Tlomon, Ishim, Omsk, Elamsk, Kaljvan, Tomsk, Kramolarsk, Nijnj Udinsk, Irkutsk, Verke-Nertsckink, Strellink, Albazine, Blagovestensk, Radde, Orlonskaya, Alexandrevskoe and Nikolaevsk, and 6 rubles and 10 copecks are paid for every word sent from one end to the other. From Irkutsk there is a branch to Khatka, on the Mongolian frontier, and from thence, for 30 copecks a word, the post conveys the dispatches to Peking in a fortnight.

It was this wire, extending from Ekaterenburg to Nikolaevsk, which had been cut, first beyond Tomsk and then between Tomsk and Kaljvan.

This was the reason why the czar, to the communication made to him for the second time by General Kissoff, had only answered by the words, "A courier this moment?"

The czar had remained motionless at the window for a few moments when the door was again opened. The chief of police appeared on the threshold.

"Enter, general," said the czar briefly, "and tell me all you know of Ivan Ogareff."

"He is an extremely dangerous man, sire," replied the chief of police.

"He ranked as colonel, did he not?"
"Yes, sire."
"Was he an intelligent officer?"
"Very intelligent, but a man whose spirit it was impossible to subdue and possessing an ambition which stopped at nothing. He soon became involved in secret intrigues, and it was then that he was degraded from his rank by his highness the grand duke and exiled to Siberia."

"How long ago was that?"
"Two years since. Pardoned after six months of exile by your majesty's favor, he returned to Russia."

"And since that time has he not returned to Siberia?"
"Yes, sire, but he voluntarily returned," replied the chief of police, adding and slightly lowering his voice, "There was a time, sire, when none returned from Siberia."

"What, sire, Siberia is and was a country whence none can return?"
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clemency he had shown that Russian justice knew how to pardon.

"Did not Ivan Ogareff," asked the czar, "return to Russia a second time after that journey through the Siberian provinces, the object of which remains unknown?"

"He did."
"And have the police lost trace of him since?"
"No, sire."
"Where was Ivan Ogareff last heard of?"

"In the province of Perm."
"In what town?"
"At Perm itself."
"What was he doing?"

"He appeared unoccupied, and there was nothing suspicious in his conduct."
"Then he was not under the surveillance of the secret police?"
"No, sire."
"When did he leave Perm?"
"About the month of March."
"To go?"
"Where is unknown."
"And since that time it is not known what has become of him?"
"No, sire, it is not known."

"Well, then, I myself know," answered the czar. "I have received anonymous communications which did not pass through the police department and in the face of events now taking place beyond the frontier I have every reason to believe that they are correct."

"Do you mean, sire," cried the chief of police, "that Ivan Ogareff has a hand in this Tartar rebellion?"

"Indeed I do, and I will now tell you something which you are ignorant of. After leaving Perm Ivan Ogareff crossed the Ural mountains, entered Siberia and penetrated the Kirghiz steppes and there endeavored, not without success, to foment rebellion among their nomadic population. He then went so far south as free Turkistan. There in the provinces of Bokhara, Khokhand and Koondooz he found chiefs willing to pour their Tartar hordes into Siberia and execute a general rising in Asiatic Russia. The storm has been silently gathering, but it has at last burst like a thunderclap, and now all means of communication between eastern and western Siberia have been stopped. Moreover, Ivan Ogareff, thirsting for vengeance, aims at the life of my brother!"

The czar had become excited while speaking and now paced up and down with hurried steps. The chief of police said nothing, but he thought to himself that during the time when the emperor of Russia never pardoned an exile schemes such as those of Ivan Ogareff could never have been realized.

A few moments passed, during which he was silent, then, approaching the czar, who had thrown himself into an armchair, he said:

"Your majesty has of course given orders that this rebellion may be suppressed as soon as possible?"
"Yes," answered the czar. "The last telegram which was able to reach Nijn Udinsk would set in motion the troops in the governments of Yenisei, Irkutsk, Yatsutsk, as well as those in the provinces of the Amur and Lake Balkal. At the same time the regiments from Perm and Nijnj Novgorod, and the Cossacks from the frontier are advancing by forced marches toward the Ural mountains. But unfortunately some weeks must pass before they can attack the Tartars."

"And your majesty's brother, his highness the grand duke, is now isolated in the government of Irkutsk and is no longer in direct communication with Moscow?"
"That is so."
"But by the last dispatches he must know what measures have been taken by your majesty and what help he may expect from the governments nearest to that of Irkutsk?"
"He knows that," answered the czar, "but what he does not know is that Ivan Ogareff, as well as being a rebel, is also playing the part of a traitor and that in him he has a personal and bitter enemy. It is to the grand duke that Ivan Ogareff owes his first disgrace, and what is more serious is that this man is not known to him. Ivan Ogareff's plan, therefore, is to go to Irkutsk and under an assumed name offer his services to the grand duke. Then, after gaining his confidence, when the Tartars have invaded Irkutsk, he will betray the town and with it my brother, whose life is directly threatened. This is what I have learned from my secret intelligence, this is what the grand duke does not know and this is what he must know."

"Well, sire, an intelligent, courageous courier!"
"I momentarily expect one."
"And it is to be hoped he will be expeditious," added the chief of police, "for allow me to add, sire, that Siberia is a favorable land for rebellions."

All communication was interrupted. Had the wires between Kaljvan and Tomsk been cut by Tartar scouts, or had the emir himself arrived in the Yeniseisk provinces? Was all the lower part of western Siberia in a ferment? Had the rebellion already spread to the eastern regions? No one could say. The only agent which fears neither cold nor heat, which can neither be stopped by the rigors of winter

nor the heat of summer and which flies with the rapidity of lightning—the electric current—was prevented from traversing the steppes, and it was no longer possible to warn the grand duke, shut up in Irkutsk, of the danger threatening him from the treason of Ivan Ogareff.

A courier only could supply the place of the interrupted electric current. It would take this man some time to traverse the 5,200 versts between Moscow and Irkutsk. To pass the ranks of the rebels and invaders he must display almost superhuman courage and intelligence. But with a clear head and a firm heart much can be done.

"Shall I be able to find this head and heart?" thought the czar.

CHAPTER II.

THE door of the imperial cabinet was again opened, and General Kissoff was announced.

"The courier?" inquired the czar eagerly.
"He is here, sire," replied General Kissoff.

"Have you found a fitting man?"
"I will answer for him to your majesty."
"Has he been in the service of the palace?"
"Yes, sire."
"You know him?"
"Personally, and at various times he has fulfilled difficult missions with success."

"Abroad?"
"In Siberia itself."
"Where does he come from?"
"From Omsk. He is a Siberian."
"Has he coolness, intelligence, courage?"
"Yes, sire; he has all the qualities necessary to succeed even where others might possibly fail."

"What is his age?"
"Thirty."
"Is he strong and vigorous?"
"Sire, he can bear cold, hunger, thirst, fatigue, to the very last extremities."
"He must have a frame of iron."
"Sire, he has."
"And a heart?"
"A heart of gold."
"His name?"
"Michael Strogoff."
"Is he ready to set out?"
"He awaits your majesty's orders in the guardroom."

"Let him come in," said the czar. In a few minutes Michael Strogoff, the courier, entered the imperial library.

The czar fixed a penetrating look upon him without uttering a word, while Michael stood perfectly motionless.

Michael Strogoff was a tall, vigorous, broad-shouldered, deep-chested man. His powerful head possessed the fine features of the Caucasian race. His well-knit frame seemed built for the performance of feats of strength. It would have been a difficult task to move such a man against his will, for when his feet were once planted on the ground it was as if they had taken root. As he doffed his Muscovite cap locks of thick curly hair fell over his broad, massive forehead. When his ordinarily pale face became at all flushed, it arose solely from a more rapid action of the heart, under the influence of a quicker circulation. His eyes of a deep blue looked with a clear, frank, firm gaze.

The slightly contracted eyebrows indicated lofty heroism—"the hero's cool courage," according to the definition of the physiologist. He possessed a fine nose, with large nostrils, and a well-shaped mouth, with the slightly projecting lips which denote a generous and noble heart.

Michael Strogoff had the temperament of a man of action, who does not bite his nails or scratch his head in doubt and indecision. Sparring of gestures as of words, he always stood motionless like a soldier before his superior, but when he moved his step showed a firmness, a freedom of movement, which proved the confidence and vivacity of his mind.

Michael Strogoff wore a handsome military uniform, something resembling that of a light cavalry officer in the field—boots, spurs, half tightly fitting trousers, brown pelisse, trimmed with fur and ornamented with yellow braid. On his breast glittered a cross and medals.

Michael Strogoff belonged to the special corps of the czar's couriers, ranking as an officer among those picked men. His most discernible characteristic—particularly in his walk, his face, in the whole man, and which the czar perceived at a glance—was that he was a "fulfiller of orders." He therefore possessed one of the most serviceable qualities in Russia—one which the celebrated novelist Turgeneff says "will lead to the highest positions in the Muscovite empire."

In short, if any one could accomplish this journey from Moscow to Irkutsk across the rebellious country, surmount obstacles and brave perils of all sorts, Michael Strogoff was the man.

A circumstance especially favorable to the success of his plans was that he was thoroughly acquainted with the country which he was about to traverse and understood its different dialects, not only from having traveled there before, but because he was of Siberian origin.

When he was fourteen, Michael Strogoff had killed his first bear quite alone. That was nothing. But after stripping it he dragged the gigantic animal's skin to his father's house, many versts distant, thus exhibiting remarkable strength in a boy so young.

Gifted with marvelous acuteness, when every object was hidden in mist or even in higher latitudes, where the polar light is prolonged for many days, he could find his way when others would have had no idea whether to direct their steps. He had learned to read almost imperceptible signs, the

forms of icicles, the appearance of the small branches of trees, mist rising far away on the horizon, vague sounds in the air, distant reports, the flight of birds through the foggy atmosphere—a thousand circumstances which are so many words to those who can decipher them. Moreover, tempered by snow like a Damascus blade in the waters of Syria, he had a frame of iron, as General Kissoff had said, and what was no less true, a heart of gold.

The only sentiment of love felt by Michael Strogoff was that which he entertained for his mother, the aged Marfa, who could never be induced to leave the house of the Strogoffs at Omsk, on the banks of the Irtysh, where the old huntsman and she had lived so long together. When her son left her, he went away with a full heart, but promising to come and see her whenever he could possibly do so, and this promise he had always religiously kept.

When Michael was twenty, it was decided that he should enter the personal service of the emperor of Russia, in the corps of the couriers of the czar. The hardy, intelligent, zealous, well-conducted young Siberian first distinguished himself especially in a journey to the Caucasus, through the midst of a difficult country, ravaged by some restless successors of Schamyl; then, later, in an important mission to Petropavlovsk, in Kamchatka, the extreme limit of Asiatic Russia. During these long journeys he displayed such marvelous coolness, prudence and courage as to gain him the approbation and protection of his chief, who rapidly advanced him in his profession.

The furloughs which were his due after these distant missions, although he might be separated from her by thousands of versts and winter had rendered the roads almost impassable, he had never failed to devote to his old mother. Having been much employed in the south of the empire, he had not seen old Marfa for three years—three ages—the first time in his life he had been so long absent from her. Now, however, in a few days he would obtain his furlough, and he had accordingly already made preparations for departure for Omsk when the events which have been related occurred.

Michael Strogoff was therefore introduced into the czar's presence in complete ignorance of what the emperor expected from him.

The czar, apparently satisfied with his scrutiny, went to his bureau and, motioning to the chief of police to seat himself, dictated in a low voice a letter of not more than a few lines. The letter penned, the czar reread it attentively and then signed it, preceding his name with these words, "Byt posomou," which, signifying "so be it," constitutes the decisive formula of the Russian emperors.

The letter was placed in an envelope, which was sealed with the imperial arms.

The czar, rising, told Michael Strogoff to draw near.

Michael advanced a few steps and then stood motionless, ready to answer.

The czar again looked him full in the face, and their eyes met. Then in an abrupt tone

"Thy name?" he asked.
"Michael Strogoff, sire."
"Thy rank?"
"Captain in the corps of couriers of the czar."
"Thou dost know Siberia?"
"I am a Siberian."
"A native of—"
"Omsk, sire."
"Hast thou relations there?"
"Yes, sire."
"What relations?"
"My old mother."
The czar suspended his questions for a moment, then, pointing to the letter which he held in his hand, he said:

"Here is a letter which I charge thee, Michael Strogoff, to deliver into the hands of the grand duke and to no other but him."
"I will deliver it, sire."
"The grand duke is at Irkutsk."
"I will go to Irkutsk."
"Thou wilt have to traverse a rebellious country, invaded by Tartars, whose interest it will be to intercept this letter."
"I will traverse it."
"Above all, beware of the traitor Ivan Ogareff, who will perhaps meet thee on the way."
"I will beware of him."
"Wilt thou pass through Omsk?"
"Sire, that is my route."
"If thou dost see thy mother, there will be the risk of being recognized. Thou must not see her!"
Michael Strogoff hesitated a moment.
"I will not see her," said he.
"Swear to me that nothing will make thee acknowledge who thou art nor whither thou art going."
"I swear it."
"Michael Strogoff," continued the czar, giving the letter to the young courier, "take this letter. On it depends the safety of all Siberia and perhaps the life of my brother, the grand duke."
"This letter shall be delivered to his highness the grand duke."
"Thou wilt pass whatever happens?"
"I shall pass, or they shall kill me."
"I want thee to live."
"I shall live, and I shall pass," answered Michael Strogoff.

The czar appeared satisfied with Strogoff's calm and simple answer.

"Go, then, Michael Strogoff," said he, "go for God, for Russia, for my brother and for myself."

The courier, having saluted his sovereign, immediately left the imperial cabinet and in a few minutes the New palace.

"You made a good choice there, general," said the czar.

"I think so, sire," replied General Kissoff, "and your majesty may be sure that Michael Strogoff will do all that a man can do."
"He is indeed a man," said the czar.

CHAPTER III.

THE distance between Moscow and Irkutsk, about to be traversed by Michael Strogoff, was 5,200 versts. Before the telegraph wire extended from the Ural mountains to the eastern frontier of Siberia the dispatch service was performed by couriers, those who traveled the most rapidly taking eighteen days to get from Moscow to Irkutsk.

In the first place, however, he must not travel as a courier of the czar usually would. No one must even suspect what he really was. Spies swarm in a rebellious country. Let him be recognized, and his mission would be in danger. Also, while supplying him with a large sum of money, which was sufficient for his journey and would facilitate it in some measure, General Kissoff had not given him any document specifying that he was in the emperor's service, which is the assumed par excellence. He contented himself with furnishing him with a podorojna.

The podorojna was made out in the name of Nicholas Korpanoff, merchant, living at Irkutsk. It authorized Nicholas Korpanoff to be accompanied, if requisite, by one or more persons, and, moreover, it was by special notification made available in the event of the Muscovite government forbidding natives of any other countries to leave Russia.

The podorojna is simply a permission to take post horses, but Michael Strogoff was not to use it unless he was sure that by so doing he would not excite suspicion as to his mission—that is to say, while he was on European territory. The consequence was that in Siberia, while traversing the insurgent provinces, he would have no power over the relays either in the choice of horses in preference to others or in demanding conveyances for his personal use. Neither was Michael Strogoff to forget that he was no longer a courier, but a plain merchant, Nicholas Korpanoff, traveling from Moscow to Irkutsk, and as such exposed to all the impediments of an ordinary journey.

To pass unknown more or less rapidly, but to pass somehow or other—such were the directions he had received.

Thirty years previously the escort of a traveler of rank consisted of not less than 200 mounted Cossacks, 200 foot soldiers, 25 Baskir horsemen, 300 camels, 400 horses, 25 wagons, 2 portable boats and 2 pieces of cannon. All this was requisite for a journey in Siberia.

Michael Strogoff, however, had neither cannon nor horsemen nor foot soldiers nor beasts of burden. He would travel in a carriage or on horseback when he could, on foot when he could not.

There would be no difficulty in getting over the first 1,500 versts, the distance between Moscow and the Russian frontier. Railroads, post carriages, steamboats, relays of horses, were at every one's disposal and consequently at the disposal of the courier of the czar.

Accordingly on the morning of the 18th of July, having doffed his uniform, with a knapsack on his back, dressed in the simple Russian costume, tightly fitting tunic, the traditional belt of the moujik, wide trousers, gartered at the knees, and high boots, Michael Strogoff arrived at the station in time for the first train. He carried no arms, openly at least, but under his belt was hidden a revolver and in his pocket one of those large knives with which a Siberian hunter can so neatly disembowel a bear without injuring its precious fur.

A crowd of travelers had collected at the Moscow station. The stations on the Russian railroads are much used as places for meeting not only by those who are about to proceed by the train, but by friends who come to see them off. It indeed resembles from the variety of characters assembled a small news exchange.

The train in which Michael took his place was to set him down at Nijnj Novgorod. There terminated at that time the iron road which, uniting Moscow and St. Petersburg, will eventually continue to the Russian frontier. It was a journey of about 400 versts, and the train would accomplish it in ten hours. Once arrived at Nijnj Novgorod, Strogoff would, according to circumstances, either take the land route or the steamers on the Volga, so as to reach the Ural mountains as soon as possible.

Michael Strogoff enclosed himself in his corner like a worthy citizen whose affairs go well with him and who endeavors to kill time by sleep.

Nevertheless, as he was not alone in his compartment, he slept with one eye open and listened with both his ears.

In fact, the rumor of the rising of the Kirghiz hordes and of the Tartar invasion had transpired in some degree. The occupants of the carriage, whom chance had made his traveling companions, discussed the subject, though with that caution which has become habitual among Russians, who know that spies are ever on the watch for any treasonable expressions which may be uttered.

At the Vladimir station fresh travelers entered the train. Among others, a young girl presented herself at the door of the carriage occupied by Michael Strogoff.

A vacant place was found opposite the courier of the czar. The young girl took it after placing by her side a modest traveling bag of red leather which seemed to constitute her luggage. Then, seating herself with downcast eyes, she prepared for a journey which was still to last several hours.

Michael Strogoff could not help looking attentively at his newly arrived fellow traveler. As she was so placed as to travel with her back to the engine, he even offered her his seat, which she might prefer to her own, but she thanked him with a slight bend of her graceful neck.

The young girl appeared to be about sixteen or seventeen years of age. Her

head, truly charming, was of the purest Slavonic type—slightly averted, and which would when a few summers had passed over her unfold into many rather than mere prettiness. From beneath a sort of kerchief which she wore on her head escaped in profusion light golden hair. Her eyes were brown, soft and expressive of much sweetness of temper. The nose was straight and attached to her pale and somewhat thin cheeks by delicate mobile nostrils. The lips were finely cut, but it seemed as if they had long since forgotten how to smile.

The young traveler was tall and upright, as well as could be judged of her figure from the very simple and ample pelisse that covered her. Although she was still a very young girl in the literal sense of the term, the development of her high forehead and clearly cut features gave the idea that she was the possessor of a great moral energy, a point which did not escape Michael Strogoff. Evidently this young girl had already suffered in the past, and the future doubtless did not present itself to her in glowing colors. But it was none the less certain that she had known how to struggle and that she had resolved to struggle still with the trials of life. Her energy was evidently prompt and persistent and her calmness unalterable even under circumstances in which a man would be likely to give way or lose his self command.

Such was the impression which she produced at first sight. Michael Strogoff, being himself of an energetic temperament, was naturally struck by the character of her physiognomy, and, while taking care not to cause her annoyance by a too persistent gaze, he observed his neighbor with no small interest. The costume of the young traveler was both extremely simple and appropriate. She was not rich—that could easily be seen—but not the slightest mark of negligence was to be discerned in her dress. All her luggage was contained in a leather bag under lock and key, and which, for want of room, she held on her lap.

She wore a long, dark pelisse, which was gracefully adjusted at the neck by a blue tie. Under this pelisse a short skirt, also dark, fell over a robe which reached to her ankles and of which the lower edge was ornamented with some simple embroidery. Half boots of worked leather and thickly soled, as if chosen in the anticipation of a long journey, covered her small feet.

Michael Strogoff fancied that he recognized by certain details the fashion of the costume of Livonia, and he thought that his neighbor must be a native of the Baltic provinces.

But whether was this young girl going alone at an age when the fostering care of a father or the protection of a brother is considered a matter of necessity? Had she now come after an already long journey from the provinces of western Russia? Was she merely going to Nijnj Novgorod, or was the end of her travels beyond the eastern frontier of the empire? Would some relation, some friend, await her arrival by the train, or was it not more probable, on the contrary, that she would find herself as much isolated in the town as she was in this compartment, where no one, she must think, appeared to care for her? It was probable.

Michael Strogoff observed her with interest, but, himself reserved, he sought no opportunity of accosting her, although several hours must elapse before the arrival of the train at Nijnj Novgorod.

At last the train, at half past 8 in the evening, arrived at the station of Nijnj Novgorod.

Before any one could get out of the carriages the inspectors of police presented themselves at the doors and examined the passengers.

Michael Strogoff showed his podorojna made out in the name of Nicholas Korpanoff. He had consequently no difficulty.

As to the other travelers in the compartment, all bound for Nijnj Novgorod, their appearance, happily for them, was in no wise suspicious.

The young girl in her turn exhibited not a passport, since passports are no longer required in Russia, but a permit indorsed with a private seal and which seemed to be of a special character. The inspector read the permit with attention. Then, having attentively examined the person whose description it contained, he said:

"You are from Riga?"
"Yes," replied the young girl.
"You are going to Irkutsk?"
"Yes."
"By what route?"
"By Perm."
"Good!" replied the inspector. "Take care to have your permit vised at the police station of Nijnj Novgorod." The young girl bent her head in token of assent.

Hearing the questions and replies, Michael Strogoff experienced a mingled sentiment both of surprise and pity. What, this young girl alone journeying to that faroff Siberia and at a time when to its ordinary dangers were added all the perils of an invaded country and one in a state of insurrection? How would she reach it? What would become of her?

The inspection ended, the doors of the carriages were opened, but before Michael Strogoff could move toward her the young Livonian, who had been the first to descend, had disappeared in the crowd which thronged the platforms of the railway station.

Nijnj Novgorod, Lower Novgorod, situated at the junction of the Volga and the Oka, is the chief town in the district of the same name. It was here that Michael Strogoff was obliged to leave the railway, which at the time did not go beyond this town. Thus as he advanced his traveling would become first less speedy and then less safe.

Nijnj Novgorod, the fixed population, of which is only from 20,000 to 25,000