

THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

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. On 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 need were, to rejoin my father?"

"I do not doubt your courage, Nadia, but there are physical fatigues which a 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 Lithuanian 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, but 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 o'clock a verst!"

"No," replied Michael, who understood the slang perfectly; "eagles, do you hear, at 9 o'clock 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 stumpy or poor traveler who at the posthouses only pays 2 or 3 coppers 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 berlin, 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 berlin had certainly not passed through Novo-Salsk and could only have struck the Irkutsk road by some less frequented route across the steppe.

Michael's first thought on seeing this berlin 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 berlin.

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

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 berlin was soon distanced by the tarantass.

It now became a regular race, for the postilion of the berlin, no doubt excited by the sight of the post of the other, redoubled his efforts.

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 berlin 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 shaggy, as are the southern provincials, while the former was ruddy like a Lancashire gentleman. The Anglo-Norman, formal, cold, grave, parsimonious of gestures and words, appearing only to speak or gesture under the influence of a spring operating at regular intervals. The Gaul, on the contrary, was lively and petulant, 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 its retina must have been 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 confrere 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 succeeding; that they possessed the imperturbable sang froid and the genuine intrepidity of men of their calling. Enthusiastic jockeys in this steepchase, 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 berlin.

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 carriages 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 berlin 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.

"Is it 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 berlin, 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.

"I must have some this moment."

"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 berlin," 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 berlin, 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 Nijal Novgorod, she said:

"Your hand, brother."

And at the same time her hand with an almost maternal gesture wiped away a tear which sprang 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 heroically sacrificed to duty even his resentment at the gross injury he had received.

Nadia, therefore, asked no 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 felt 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 Tioukalsk, 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 Koukatsinskoe, 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 Altai mountains, it flows from the southwest to the northwest and empties itself into the Obi after a course of nearly 7,000 versts.

At this time of year, when all the rivers of the Siberian basin are much swollen, the waters of the Irtysh were very high. In consequence the current was changed to a regular torrent, rendering the passage difficult enough. A swimmer could not have crossed, however powerful a one he might be, and even in a ferryboat there would be some danger.

But Michael and Nadia, determined to brave all perils whatever they might be, did not dream of shrinking from this one.

However, Michael proposed to his young companion that he should cross first, embarking in the ferryboat with the tarantass and horses, as he feared that the weight of this load would render it less safe. After landing the carriage on the opposite bank he would return and fetch Nadia.

The girl refused. It would be the delay of an hour, and she would not for her safety alone be the cause of it. The embarkation was made not without difficulty, for the banks were partly flooded and the boat could not get in near enough.

However, after half an hour's exertion the boatmen got the tarantass and the three horses on board. Michael, Nadia and the driver embarked also, and they shoved off.

For a few minutes all went well. A little way up the river the current was broken by a long point projecting from the bank and formed an eddy easily crossed by the boat. The two boatmen propelled their large with long poles, which they handled cleverly, but as they gained the middle of the stream it grew deeper and deeper until at last they could only just reach the bottom. The ends of the poles were only a foot above the water, which rendered their use difficult and insufficient. Michael and Nadia, seated in the stern of the boat and always in dread of a delay, watched the boatmen with some uneasiness.

"Look out!" cried one of them to his comrade.

The shout was occasioned by the new direction the boat was rapidly taking. It had got into the direct current and was being swept down the river. By diligent use of the poles, putting the ends in a series of notches cut below the guanine, the boatmen managed to keep their craft against the stream and slowly urged it in a slanting direction toward the right bank.

They calculated on reaching it some five or six versts below the landing place; but, after all, that would not matter so long as men and beasts could disembark without accident. The two stout boatmen, stimulated, moreover, by the promise of double fare, did not doubt of succeeding in this difficult passage of the Irtysh.

But they reckoned without an incident which they were powerless to prevent, and neither their zeal nor their skillfulness could under the circumstances have done more.

The boat was in the middle of the current at nearly equal distances from either shore and being carried down at the rate of two versts an hour when Michael, springing to his feet, bent his gaze up the river.

Several boats, aided by oars as well as by the current, were coming swiftly down upon them.

Michael's brow contracted, and an exclamation escaped him.

"What is the matter?" asked the girl. But before Michael had time to reply one of the boatmen exclaimed in an accent of terror:

"The Tartars! The Tartars!"

"They were indeed boats full of soldiers, and in a few minutes they must reach the ferryboat, it being too heavily laden to escape from them.

The terrified boatmen uttered exclamations of despair and dropped their poles.

"Courage, my friends!" cried Michael. "Courage! Fifty rubles for you if we reach the right bank before the boats overtake us!"

Incited by these words, the boatmen again worked manfully away, but it soon became evident that they could not escape the Tartars.

It was scarcely probable that they would pass without attacking them. On the contrary, there was everything to be feared from robbers such as these.

"Do not be afraid, Nadia," said Michael, "but be ready for anything."

"I am ready," replied Nadia.

"Even to throw yourself into the water when I tell you?"

"Whenever you tell me."

"Have confidence in me, Nadia."

"I have indeed."

The Tartar boats were now only a hundred feet distant. They carried a detachment of Bokharian soldiers on their way to reconnoiter round Omsk.

The ferryboat was still two lengths from the shore. The boatmen redoubled their efforts. Michael himself seized a pole and wielded it with superhuman strength. If he could land the tarantass and horses and dash off with them, there was some chance of escaping the Tartars, who were not mounted.

But all their efforts were in vain. The soldiers from the first boat about-

ed. Michael recognized the Tartar war-cry, which is usually answered by lying flat on the ground.

As neither he nor the boatmen obeyed this injunction, a volley was let fly among them, and two of the horses were mortally wounded.

At the next moment a violent blow was felt. The boats had run into the ferryboat.

"Come, Nadia!" cried Michael, ready to jump overboard.

The girl was about to follow him when a blow from a lance struck him, and he was thrown into the water. The current swept him away. His hand raised for an instant above the waves, and then he disappeared.

Nadia uttered a cry, but before she had time to throw herself after him she was seized and dragged into one of the boats.

In a few minutes the boatmen were killed and the ferryboat was left to drift away while the Tartars continued to descend the Irtysh.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE blow which had struck Michael Strogoff was not mortal. By swimming in a manner by which he had effectually concealed himself he had reached the right bank, where he fell exhausted among the bushes.

When he recovered his senses, he found himself in the cabin of a mujik, who had picked him up and cared for him and to whom he owed his life. For how long a time had he been the guest of this brave Siberian? He could not guess, but when he opened his eyes he saw the handsome bearded face bending over him and regarding him with pitying eyes. He was about to ask where he was when the mujik, anticipating him, said:

"Do not speak, little father, do not speak. Thou art still too weak. I will tell thee where thou art and everything that has passed since I brought thee to my cabin."

And the mujik related to Michael Strogoff the different incidents of the struggle which he had witnessed—the attack upon the ferry by the Tartar boats, the pillage of the tarantass and the massacre of the boatmen.

But Michael Strogoff listened no longer, and, slipping his hand under his garment, he felt the imperial letter still secured in his breast.

He breathed a sigh of relief. But that was not all.

"A young girl accompanied me," said he.

"They have not killed her," replied the mujik, anticipating the anxiety which he read in the eyes of his guest. "They have carried her off in their boat and have continued the descent of the Irtysh. It is only one prisoner more to join so many others which they are taking to Tomsk."

Michael Strogoff was unable to reply. He pressed his hand upon his heart to restrain his beating.

But, notwithstanding these many trials, the sentiment of duty mastered his whole soul.

He remembered the errand which he had undertaken. Indeed never by day or night was his emperor's mission for even a moment absent from his mind. Not the presence of the greatest danger, the tortures of hunger and thirst, the weariness of excessive fatigue, not even all combined could cause him to forget that a momentous matter was entrusted to his courage, his zeal, his fidelity and his endurance. Michael Strogoff was worthy of this trust.

"Where am I?" asked he.

"Upon the right bank of the Irtysh, only five versts from Omsk," replied the mujik.

"What would can I have received which could have thus prostrated me? It was not a gunshot wound?"

"No; a lance thrust upon the head, now healing," replied the mujik. "After a few days' rest, little father, thou wilt be able to proceed. Thou didst fall into the river, but the Tartars neither touched nor searched thee, and thy purse is still in thy pocket."

Michael Strogoff gripped the mujik's hand. Then, recovering himself with a sudden effort, "Friend," said he, "how long have I been in thy hut?"

"Three days."

"Three days lost!"

"Three days hast thou lain unconscious."