

Michael Strogoff and the mujik soon arrived in the mercantile quarter of the lower town, and, although under military occupation, they entered it without difficulty. The surrounding earth-work had been destroyed in many places, and there were the breaches through which the marauders who followed the armies of Pefar-hahn had penetrated.

The mujik was conducting his guest straight to the posting house when in a narrow street Michael Strogoff, coming to a sudden stop, sprang behind a jutting wall.

"What is the matter?" quickly asked the mujik, much astonished at this sudden movement.

"Silence!" hastily replied Michael Strogoff, with his finger on his lips.

At this moment a detachment debouched from the principal square into the street which Michael Strogoff and his companion had been just following.

At the head of the detachment, composed of twenty horsemen, was an officer dressed in a very simple uniform. Although he glanced rapidly from one side to the other, he could not have seen Michael Strogoff crouching to his precipitous retreat.

The detachment went at full trot into the narrow street. Neither the officer nor his escort concerned themselves about the inhabitants. Several unlucky ones had scarcely time to make way for their passage. There were, therefore, a few half stifled cries, to which the dust of the lance gave an instant answer, and the street was immediately cleared.

When the escort had disappeared, "Who is that officer?" asked Michael Strogoff, returning toward the mujik. And while putting the question his face was pale as that of a corpse.

"It is Ivan Ogareff," replied the Siberian, but in a deep voice which breathed hatred.

"He?" cried Michael Strogoff, from whom the word escaped with an accent of fury which he could not conquer. He had just recognized in this officer the traveler who had struck him at the posting house of Ichim, and, although he had only caught a glimpse of him, it burst upon his mind at the same time that this traveler was the old Zingari whose words he had overheard in the market place of Nijni Novgorod.

The mujik and Michael resumed their way and arrived at the posting house. To leave Omak by one of the breaches would not be difficult after nightfall. As for purchasing a carriage to replace the tarantass, that was impossible. There was none to be let or sold. But what was Michael Strogoff now for a carriage? Was he not alone, alas? A horse would suffice him, and, very fortunately, a horse could be had. It was an animal of mettle, capable of enduring much fatigue, and Michael Strogoff, accomplished horseman as he was, could make good use of it.

The horse cost a high price, and a few moments later Michael was ready to start. It was then 4 o'clock in the afternoon.

Michael Strogoff, compelled to wait till nightfall in order to pass the fortifications, but not desiring to show himself in the streets of Omak, remained in the posting house and there partook of food.

There was a great crowd in the public room, it being the resort of numbers of the anxious inhabitants, who at this eventful period collected there to obtain news. They were talking of the expected arrival of a corps of Muscovite troops, not at Omak, but at Tomsk, a corps intended to recapture that town from the Tartars of Pefar-Kahn.

Michael Strogoff lent an attentive ear to all that was said, but took no part in the conversation.

Suddenly a cry made him tremble, a cry which penetrated to the depths of his soul, and these two words, so to speak, rushed into his ear:

"My son!"

His mother, the old woman Marfa, was before him! Trembling, she smiled upon him. She stretched forth her arms to him. Michael Strogoff arose. He was about to throw himself—

The thought of duty, the serious danger for his mother and himself in this unfortunate meeting, suddenly stopped him, and such was his command over himself that not a muscle of his face moved.

There were twenty people in the public room. Among them were perhaps spies, and was it not known in the town that the son of Marfa Strogoff belonged to the corps of the couriers of the czar?

Michael Strogoff did not move.

"Michael!" cried his mother.

"Who are you, my good lady?" Michael Strogoff stammered, unable to speak in his usual firm tone.

"Who am I, thou askest? Dost thou no longer know thy mother?"

"You are mistaken," coldly replied Michael Strogoff. "A resemblance deceives you."

The old Marfa went up to him and, looking straight into his eyes, said:

"Thou art not the son of Peter and Marfa Strogoff?"

Michael Strogoff would have given his life to have looked his mother in his arms, but if he yielded it was all over with him, with her, with his mission, with his oath! Completely master of himself, he closed his eyes in order not to see the inexpressible anguish which agitated the revered countenance of his mother. He drew back his hands in order not to touch those trembling hands which sought him.

"I do not know, in truth, what it is you say, my good woman," he replied, stepping back.

"Michael!" again cried his aged mother.

fort, had gone. He did not see his own mother, who had fallen back almost inanimate upon a bench. But when the postmaster hastened to assist her the aged woman raised herself. Suddenly a thought occurred to her. She denied by her son! It was not possible. As for being herself deceived and taking another for him—equally impossible. It was certainly her son whom she had just seen, and if he had not recognized her it was because he would not, it was because he ought not, it was because he had some cogent reason for acting thus! And then, her mother feelings arising within her, she had but one thought—"Can I unwittingly have ruined him?"

"I am mad," she said to her interrogators. "My eyes have deceived me! This young man is not my child. He had not his voice. Let us think no more of it. If we do, I shall end by finding him everywhere."

Less than ten minutes afterward a Tartar officer appeared in the posting house.

"Marfa Strogoff?" he asked.

"It is I," replied the old woman in a tone so calm and with a face so tranquil that those who had witnessed the meeting with her son would not have known her.

"Come," said the officer. Marfa Strogoff, with firm step, followed the Tartar officer and left the posting house.

Some moments afterward Michael Strogoff found himself in the chief square and in the presence of Ivan Ogareff, to whom all the details of this scene had been immediately reported.

Ivan Ogareff, suspecting the truth, interrogated the old Siberian woman.

"Thy name?" he asked in a rough voice.

"Marfa Strogoff."

"Thou hast a son?"

"Yes."

"He is a courier of the czar?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"At Moscow."

"Thou hast heard no news of him?"

"No news."

"Since how long?"

"Since two months."

"Who, then, was that young man whom thou didst call thy son a few moments ago at the posting house?"

"A young Siberian whom I took for him," replied Marfa Strogoff. "This is the tenth man in whom I have thought I recognized my son since the town has been so full of strangers. I think I see him everywhere."

"So this young man was not Michael Strogoff?"

"It was not Michael Strogoff."

"Dost thou know, old woman, that I can torture thee until thou avowest the truth?"

"I have spoken the truth, and torture will not cause me to alter my words in any way."

"This Siberian was not Michael Strogoff?" asked a second time Ivan Ogareff.

"No, it was not he," replied a second time Marfa Strogoff. "Do you think that for anything in the world I would deny a son whom God has given me?"

Ivan Ogareff regarded with an evil eye the old woman who had braved him to the face. He did not doubt but that she had recognized her son in this young Siberian. Now, if this son had first renounced his mother and if his mother renounced him in her turn it could occur only from the most weighty motive.

Every circumstance went to confirm his suspicions. If he could but lay his hand upon this pretended merchant of Irkutsk and strip off his disguise, would he not find a treasure indeed? Would not his superiors well reward his adroitness and his success? Would not the czar of Russia scowl with rage when he learned that his courier was in the hands of his foes?

Ivan Ogareff had therefore no doubt that the pretended Nicholas Korpanoff was Michael Strogoff, courier of the czar, seeking concealment under a false name and charged with some mission which it would have been important for him to know. He therefore at once gave orders for his pursuit. Then he said:

"Let this woman be conducted to Tomsk," returning toward Marfa Strogoff.

And while the soldiers brutally dragged her along he added between his teeth:

"When the moment arrives, I shall know how to make her speak, this old sorceress!"

CHAPTER IX.

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

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

But what he did not know and could not know was that Marfa Strogoff was in the hands of Ivan Ogareff and that she was about to atone, perhaps with her life, for that natural exhibition of her feelings which she had been unable to restrain when she suddenly found herself in the presence of her son. And it was fortunate that he was ignorant of it. Could he have withstood this fresh trial?

Michael Strogoff urged on his horse, imbuing him with all his own feverish impatience, requiring of him one thing only—namely, to hear him rapidly to the next posting house, where he could be exchanged for a quicker conveyance.

At midnight he had cleared seventy versts and halted at the station of Kouloukovo. But there, as he feared, he found neither horses nor carriages. Several Tartar detachments had passed along the highway of the steppe. Everything had been stolen or requisitioned both in the villages and in the posting houses. It was with difficulty that Michael Strogoff was even able to obtain some refreshment for his horse and himself.

It was of great importance therefore to spare his horse, for he could not tell when or how he might be able to replace it. Desiring, however, to put the greatest possible distance between himself and the horsemen whom Ivan Ogareff had no doubt dispatched in pursuit, he resolved to push on. After one hour's rest he resumed his course across the steppe.

And on July 30, at 4 p. m., Michael Strogoff, heedless of fatigue, arrived at Elansk.

There he was forced to give a night's rest to his horse. The courageous beast could not have continued that journey any longer.

At Elansk there was no means of transportation for the same reasons as in the burghs already passed by—carriages and horses were gone.

Elansk, a small town the Tartars had not visited yet, was almost completely depopulated, for it was very easy to invade it from the south and almost impossible to succor it from the north. So relay of post, police station, government building, all were abandoned by governmental order, and on one side the functionaries, on the other the inhabitants, had gone to Kamsk, in the center of the Baraba.

Michael Strogoff was obliged to pass the night at Elansk to permit his horse to rest at least twelve hours. He remembered the instructions given him at Moscow to cross Siberia unknown, reach Irkutsk at all hazards, but also to not sacrifice success to the swiftness of his passage. Consequently he was forced to spare the only means of travel left him.

On the morning Michael Strogoff left Elansk, and five days later, on the 5th of August, twenty-one days since starting, he found himself 1,500 versts yet distant from Irkutsk.

Michael Strogoff was rapidly nearing Kalyvan when distant detonations reached his ears.

He stopped and distinctly heard the dull, heavy reports which shook the air, mingled with sharper and shriller sounds, the cause of which he well knew.

He was only half a mile from Kalyvan when a long jet of flame dashed betwixt the houses of the city, and the spire of a church crumbled down in the middle of a torrent of embers and fire.

At that moment the detonations were very violent. Soon the flames stretched forth on the left of the city. The fire had devoured a whole quarter of Kalyvan.

Michael Strogoff was running across the plain, trying to reach the cover of some trees scattered here and there, when a detachment of Tartar cavalry appeared on the right.

Michael Strogoff could no longer go in that direction. The horsemen advanced rapidly toward the city, and it was difficult for him to escape. Suddenly at the corner of a thicket he saw a house which he might perhaps reach unperceived.

To run, to hide himself, to ask and to take there, if need be, something to renew his strength, for he was exhausted with fatigue and hunger, was Michael Strogoff's only resource. He fled then to this shelter, and, drawing near, he perceived that it was a telegraph station. Two wires were going east and west, and a third was stretched toward Kalyvan.

One would suppose that under the circumstances that station would have been abandoned, but as it was Michael Strogoff could find there a refuge, wait for the night if need be to travel again across the steppe which was searched by the Tartar pickets.

Michael Strogoff hurried toward the door of that house and opened it hastily. A single person was in the room where the dispatches were written. He was an employee, calm, cool, indifferent to all that was going on outside. Faithful to his post, he waited behind his window for the public to claim his services.

Michael Strogoff went to him and with a voice broken by fatigue asked:

"What do you know?"

"Nothing," answered the employee, smiling.

"Are the Russians and Tartars fighting?"

"People say so."

"But who are the victors?"

"I don't know."

So much coolness in the midst of these terrible occurrences, so much indifference even, was hardly possible.

"And is not the wire cut?" asked Michael Strogoff.

"It is cut between Kalyvan and Krasnopolarsk, but it works yet between Kalyvan and the Russian frontier."

"For the government?"

"For the government when they think it proper, for the public when they say. It is 10 copecks a word. I wait your orders, sir."

Michael Strogoff was going to suggest that strange operator that he had no dispatch to send; that he wanted only

a little bread and water, when suddenly the door of the house was abruptly opened.

Michael Strogoff thought the office invaded by the Tartars and was about to jump through the window when he noticed that two men only entered the room and that they were far from being Tartar soldiers.

One of them held a dispatch written in pencil, and, outrunning the other, he was at the window of the atolal employee. In those two men Michael Strogoff was astonished to discover two persons he had thought never to see again. They were the correspondents Harry Blount and Alcide Jolivet, no more traveling companions, but rivals, enemies, now that they were operating on the battlefield.

They had left Ichim a few hours only after the departure of Michael Strogoff, and if they arrived before him at Kalyvan in following the same route it was because Michael Strogoff had lost three days on the borders of the Irish. And now, after having witnessed the battle between the Russians and the Tartars in front of the city, leaving the city when the struggle was still going on in the streets, they had to run to the station to send away their dispatches to Europe, each seeking to rob the other of priority in describing the stirring events.

Michael Strogoff kept at a distance in the shadow, and without being seen he could see all and hear all. He was probably about to learn important news and know if he ought to enter Kalyvan or not.

Harry Blount, more alert than his colleague, had possession of the window and handed in his dispatch, while Alcide Jolivet, contrary to his habits, stopped impatiently. "Ten copecks a word," said the operator, taking the dispatch.

Harry Blount placed a pile of rubles on the counter, his confrere looking at him somewhat stupefied.

"Well," said the employee, and with undisturbed sang froid he commenced to telegraph the following dispatch:

Daily Telegraph, London:  
From Kalyvan. Government of Omak, Siberia, Aug. 1.—Engagement of Russian troops with Tartars.

That reading being made aloud, Michael Strogoff could hear all the English correspondent addressed to his paper.

Russian troops repulsed with great losses. Tartars enter Kalyvan this day.

These words ended the dispatch.

"My turn now," said Alcide Jolivet, who tried to pass his dispatch addressed to his cousin of the Montmartre Faubourg.

But that did not suit the English reporter, who thought of remaining at the window as long as he should have news to transmit, as fast as "fresh events might occur, so he did not give place to his confrere.

"You are through!" cried Alcide Jolivet.

"I am not through," simply answered Harry Blount.

And he went on writing words which he passed to the operator, who read very quickly:

In the beginning God created heaven and earth.

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

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

"That is the right of the gentleman," said the employee coolly, pointing to Harry Blount, smiling kindly to him.

And he continued to transmit to The Daily Telegraph the first book of the holy writ.

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

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

Two churches in flames. The fire seems to gain on the right. The earth was without form and void. Darkness covered the face of the earth.

Alcide Jolivet had simply a ferocious desire to strangle the honorable reporter of The Daily Telegraph.

He once more called upon the employee, who again coolly answered:

"It is his right, sir; it is his right. Ten copecks a word."

And he telegraphed the following news, handed him by Blount:

Russian forces escape the city. And God said, "Let there be light, and there was light."

Alcide Jolivet was literally transported with rage.

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

Madeline Jolivet, 10 Faubourg Montmartre, Paris: Kalyvan, Government of Omak, Aug. 1.—Russian army from the city. Russian detachments pursued by the Tartars.

And when Harry Blount came back he heard Alcide Jolivet completing his telegram, singing musically with mockery:

"There was a little man all dressed in gray, in Paris."

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

At that moment a commotion shook the telegraph office. A shell had entered the wall, and a cloud of dust filled the waiting room.

Alcide Jolivet was just finishing his

verse, "And as an apple, who was out a penny, but without stopping threw himself on the shell, took it in his hands before it exploded, threw it out of the window and came back to the window. It was all done in an instant."

In five seconds the shell burst outside.

Such, continuing his telegram with perfect coolness, Alcide Jolivet wrote:

A shell of thirty pounds weight has burst through the wall of the telegraph office. Some shells are more dangerous.

For Michael Strogoff there was no room to doubt but that the Russians were repulsed from Kalyvan. His last resource was, then, to hasten over the southern plain.

But then the general discharge of guns was heard terribly near the telegraph station, and a hailstorm of bullets crashed through the window. Harry Blount, struck on the shoulder, fell.

Alcide Jolivet was at that moment about to transmit this supplement to his dispatch:

Harry Blount, reporter of The Daily Telegraph, killed at Kalyvan, struck with a piece of shell.

But the operator told him with imperturbable coolness:

"Sir, the wire is broken."

And, leaving his window, he quietly took his hat, which he brushed with his sleeve, and, always smiling, went out through a small door which Michael Strogoff had not before noticed.

The station was then invaded by Tartars, and neither Michael Strogoff nor the journalists were able to effect their retreat.

Alcide Jolivet, with his useless dispatch in hand, ran to Harry Blount, stretched on the floor, and kind as he was, took him on his shoulders with the intention to flee with him. It was too late.

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

(To be continued.)

Jules Verne

the famous novelist, is the author of our next Serial Story.

The Courier

of the Czar

It is a story of adventure, abounding in

Thrilling Incidents

Hairbreadth Escapes

A tender love romance running through the story intensifies the interest and adds to the reader's pleasure.

Don't Miss Opening Chapters

A New Catholic Summer School

Catholic summer schools are multiplying as it was announced that a new one is still another established.

Quincy, Ill. has bought the property known as the Alfred Chesley farm, on Chautauque lake, and intends to build upon it a summer residence for himself and also a summer school.

The farm comprises about seventy acres and is situated between Mayville, the county seat of Chautauque county, and Jamestown, the largest town in the county. It is within fifteen miles of the Chautauque Assembly grounds and is opposite Bemis point. The establishment of a summer school like the one now contemplated has long been the desire of the Catholics in that part of the state and at last this educational plan is to be realized and speedily put into operation.

Ellis Allen Starr of Chicago, the noted Catholic author who was honored last year by his fellow Catholics of the state for his literary work, died recently at the home of his brother in Durand, Ill.

The Catholic Knights of Ohio at an annual convention at Columbus recently adopted resolutions pledging the 32,000 members of the organization against the American custom of treating so inhumanly the obligation was incorporated in the association laws and made a condition of membership.

My the will of the state of Ohio, a bill for the purpose of amending the laws relating to the office of the auditor of state, was introduced in the house of representatives.

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