

THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

CHAPTER X.



A day's march from Kalyan, several verst beyond the town of Diachinks, stretches a wide plain, planted here and there with great trees, principally pines and cedars. There stood the Tartar tents. There Feofar-Khan, the terrible emir of Bokhara, was encamped, and there, on the following day, the 7th of August, were brought the prisoners taken at Kalyan after the annihilation of the Russian force, which had vainly attempted to oppose the progress of the invaders. Of the 2,000 men who had engaged with the two columns of the enemy, the bases of which rested on Tomsk and Omsk, only a few hundred remained. Thus events were going badly, and the imperial government appeared to have lost its power beyond the frontiers of the Ural, for a time at least, for the Russians could not fail eventually to defeat the savage hordes of the invaders. But in the meantime the invasion had reached the center of Siberia, and it was spreading through the revolted country both to the east and the western provinces. If the troops of the Amur and the province of Transbaikalia did not arrive in time to occupy it, this central of Asiatic Russia, being insufficiently garrisoned, would fall into the hands of the Tartars, and before it could be retaken the grand duke, by the order of the emperor, would be forced to flee to the vengeance of Ivan Ogareff.

Feofar's camp presented a magnificent spectacle. Numberless tents of skin or silk glistened in the rays of the sun. The tiny pyramids which surmounted their conical tops waved amid banners, flags and pennons of every color. The richest of these tents belonged to the Seides and Khodjas, who are the principal personages of the Hamate. A special pavilion, ornamented with a hor's tail issuing from a heap of red and white sticks artistically interlaced, indicated the high rank of these Tartar chiefs. Then in the distance rose several thousand of the Turcoman tents, which had been carried on the backs of camels.

The camp contained at least a hundred and fifty thousand soldiers, as many foot as horse soldiers, collected under the name of Alamanes. Among them and as the principal types of Turkmen would have been remarked the Tadzhiks from their regular features, white skin, tall forms and black eyes and hair. They formed the bulk of the Tartar army, and of them the khannates of Khokhand and Koundough had furnished a contingent nearly equal to that of Bokhara. With the Tadzhiks were mingled specimens of different races who either reside in Turkestan or whose native countries border on it. There were Usbecks, red bearded, small in stature, similar to those who had pursued Michael. Here were Kirghis, with flat faces like the Kalmycks, dressed in coats of mail. Some carried the lance, bows and arrows of Asiatic manufacture, some the saber, a matchlock gun and a little short handled ax, the wounds from which invariably prove fatal. There were Mongols, of middle height, with black hair plaited into pigtails, which hung down their backs, round faces, swarthy complexions, lively deep set eyes, scanty beards, dressed in blue nankeen trimmed with black plush, sword belts of leather with silver buckles, boots gayly braided and silk caps edged with fur and three ribbons fluttering behind. Brown skinned Afghans, too, might have been seen. Arabs, having the primitive type of the beautiful Semitic races, and Turcomans, with eyes which looked as if they had lost the pupil—a I enrolled under the emir's flag, the flag of incendiaries and devastators.

When the prisoners were brought into the camp, the emir was in his tent. He did not show himself. This was fortunate no doubt. A sign, a word, from him might have been the signal for some bloody execution. But he entrenched himself in that isolation which constitutes in part the majesty of eastern kings. He who does not show himself is admired and, above all, feared.

As to the prisoners, they were to be penned up in some inclosure where, ill treated, poorly fed and exposed to all the inclemencies of the weather, they would await Feofar's pleasure. The most docile and patient of them all was undoubtedly Michael Strogoff. He allowed himself to be led, for they were leading him where he wished to go, and under conditions of safety which free he could not have found on the road from Kalyan to Tomsk. To escape before reaching that town was to risk again falling into the hands of the scouts who were scouring the steppe.

At the same time with Michael Strogoff and many other prisoners Harry Blount and Alcide Jolivet had also been taken to the Tartar camp. Their former traveling companion, captured like them at the telegraph office, knew that they were penned up with him in the inclosure guarded by numerous sentries, but he did not wish to accept of a matter of little to him at this juncture, especially what they might think of him if he were to be seen. He might have acted alone if necessary. He therefore held himself aloof from his former acquaintances.

From the moment that Harry Blount had fallen by his side Jolivet had not ceased his attentions to him. During the journey from Kalyan to the camp, that is to say, for several hours, Blount, by leaning on his companion's arm, had been enabled to follow the rest of the prisoners. He had tried to make known that he was a British subject, but it had no effect on the barbarians, who only replied by words with a lance or sword. The care president of The Italy Telegraph was therefore obliged to submit to the common lot, resolving to protest later and to obtain satisfaction for such treatment. But his journey was not the less disagreeable to him, for his wound caused him much pain, and without Alcide Jolivet's assistance he might never have reached the camp.

Jolivet, whose practical philosophy never abandoned him, had physically and morally strengthened his companion by every means in his power. His first care when they found themselves definitely established in the inclosure was to examine Blount's wound. Having managed to draw off his coat, he found that the shoulder had been only grazed by the shot.

"This is nothing," he said, "a mere scratch. After two or three dressings you will be all right."

"But these dressings?" asked Blount. "I will make them for you myself."

"Then you are something of a doctor?"

"All Frenchmen are something of doctors."

And on this affirmation Alcide, tearing his handkerchief, made him of one piece, bandages of the other, took some water from a well dug in the middle of the inclosure, bathed the wound, which he happily was not serious, and skillfully placed the wet rag on Harry Blount's shoulder.

"I thank you, M. Jolivet," said Harry, stretching himself on a bed of dry leaves which his companion had arranged for him in the shade of a birch tree.

"Now let us talk of what we ought to do. I assure you I have no intention of remaining a prisoner to these Tartars for an indefinite time."

"Nor I either."

"We will escape on the first opportunity."

"Yes, if there is no other way of regaining our liberty."

"Do you know of any other?" asked Blount, looking at his companion.

"Certainly. We are not belligerents; we are neutral, and we will claim our freedom."

"From that brute of a Feofar-Khan?"

"No; he would not understand," answered Jolivet, "but from his lieutenant, Ivan Ogareff."

"He is a villain."

"No doubt, but the villain is a Russian. He knows that it does not do to trifle with the rights of men, and he has no interest to retain us. On the contrary. But to ask a favor of that gentleman does not quite suit my taste."

a calm step. Ogareff pressed his spurs into his horse's flanks and, followed by his staff of Tartar officers, rode toward the emir's tent.

Feofar-Khan was expecting his lieutenant. The council, composed of the bearer of the royal seal, the khodja and some high officers, had taken their places in the tent.

Ivan Ogareff dismounted, entered and stood before the emir.

Feofar-Khan was a man of forty, tall, rather pale, of a fierce countenance and eyes with an evil expression. A curly black beard flowed over his chest. With his war costume, coat of mail of gold and silver, cross belt glistening with precious stones, scabbard curved like a yataghan and set with sparkling gems, boots with golden spurs, breast ornamented with an array of brilliant diamonds, Feofar presented an aspect rather strange than imposing for a Tartar Sardanapalus, an undisputed sovereign, who directs his pleasure the life and fortunes of his subjects, whose power is unlimited, and to whom at Bokhara by special privilege the title of emir is given.

When Ivan Ogareff appeared, the great dignitaries remained seated on their gold embroidered cushions, but Feofar rose from a rich divan which occupied the back part of the tent, the crowd being hidden under the thick carpet pile of a Bokharian carpet.

The emir approached Ogareff and gave him a kiss, the meaning of which he could not mistake. This kiss made the lieutenant chief of the council and placed him temporarily about the khodja.

Then Feofar addressed himself to Ivan Ogareff.

"I have no need to question you," said he. "Speak, Ivan. You will find here ears very ready to listen to you."

"This is what I have to make known to you," answered Ogareff.

Ivan Ogareff spoke in the Tartar language, giving to his phrases the emphatic turn which distinguishes the language of the orientals.

"This is not the time for unnecessary words. What I have done at the head of your troops you know. The lines of the Ichim, and the Irish are now in our power, and the Turcoman horsemen can bathe their horses in the now Tartar waters. The Kirghiz hordes rose at the voice of Feofar-Khan, and the principal Siberian route from Ichim to Tomsk belongs to you. You can therefore push on your troops as well toward the east, where the sun rises, as toward the west, where he sets."

"But the armies of the sultan of St. Petersburg?" said Feofar-Khan, designating the emperor of Russia by this strange title.

"You have nothing to fear from them, either from the east or from the west," replied Ivan Ogareff. "The invasion has been sudden, and before the Russian army can succor them Irkutsk or Tobolsk will have fallen into your power. The czar's troops have been overwhelmed at Kalyan, as they will be everywhere where you meet them."

"And what advice does your devotion to the Tartar cause suggest?" asked the emir after a few moments' silence.

"My advice," answered Ivan Ogareff quickly, "is to march to meet the sun. It is to give the grass of the eastern steppes to the Turcoman horses to consume. It is to take Irkutsk, the capital of the eastern provinces, and with it a hostage the possession of whom is worth a whole country. In the place of the czar the grand duke, his brother, must fall into your hands."

This was the great result aimed at by Ivan Ogareff. To listen to him one would have taken him for one of the cruel descendants of Stephen Razin, the celebrated pirate who ravaged southern Russia in the eighteenth century. To seize the grand duke, murder him pitilessly, would fully satisfy his hatred. Besides, with the capture of Irkutsk, all eastern Siberia would pass under the Tartar domination.

"It shall be thus, Ivan," replied Feofar.

"What are your orders?"

"Today our headquarters shall be removed to Tomsk."

Ogareff bowed, and, followed by the hussch-begul, he retired to execute the emir's orders.

As he was about to mount his horse to return to the outposts a tumult broke out at some distance, in the part of the camp reserved for the prisoners. Shouts were heard and two or three shots fired. Perhaps it was an attempt at revolt or escape, which must be summarily suppressed.

Ivan Ogareff and the hussch-begul walked forward a few steps, and almost immediately two men, whom the soldiers had not been able to keep back, appeared before them.

The hussch-begul, without more information, made a sign which was an order for death, and the heads of the two prisoners would have rolled on the ground had not Ogareff uttered a few words which arrested the sword already raised.

Michael would no doubt have kept to the latter plan had he not learned that Feofar-Khan and Ivan Ogareff had already set out for the town at the head of some thousands of horsemen.

that Colonel Ogareff and the rude persuasion of Ichim are one!"

"Then he added in his companion's ear:

"Explain our affair, Blount. You will do me a service. This Russian colonel in the midst of a Tartar camp disgusts me, and although, thanks to him, my head is still on my shoulders, my eyes would exhibit my feelings were I to attempt to look him in the face."

So saying, Alcide Jolivet assumed a look of complete and haughty indifference.

Whether or not Ivan Ogareff perceived that the prisoner's attitude was insulting toward him, he did not let it appear.

"Who are you, gentlemen?" he asked in Russian in a cold tone, but free from its rudeness.

"Two correspondents of English and French newspapers," replied Blount laconically.

"You have doubtless papers which will establish your identity?"

"Here are letters which accredit us in Russia from the English and French chancellors' office."

Ivan Ogareff took the letters which Blount held out to him and read them attentively. Then said he:

"You ask the authorization to follow our military operations in Siberia?"

"We wish to be free, that is all," answered the English correspondent dryly.

"You are so, gentlemen," answered Ogareff, "and I shall be curious to read your articles in The Daily Telegraph."

"Sir," replied Harry Blount, with the most imperturbable coolness, "it is sixpence a number, including postage."

And thereupon Blount returned to his companion, who appeared to approve completely of his replies.

Ivan Ogareff, without frowning, mounted his horse and, going to the head of his escort, soon disappeared in a cloud of dust.

"Well, M. Jolivet, what do you think of Colonel Ivan Ogareff, general in chief of the Tartar troops?" asked Blount.

"I think, my dear friend," replied Alcide, smiling, "that the hussch-begul made a very graceful gesture when he gave the order for our heads to be cut off."

Whatever was the motive which led Ogareff to act thus in regard to the two correspondents, they were free and could move at their pleasure over the scene of war. Their intention was not to leave it. The sort of antipathy which formerly they had entertained for each other had given place to a sincere friendship. Circumstances having brought them together, they no longer thought of separating. The petty questions of rivalry were forever extinguished. Harry Blount could never forget what he owed his companion, who, on the other hand, never tried to remind him of it. This friendship, too, assisted the reporting operations and was thus to the advantage of their readers.

"And now," asked Blount, "what shall we do with our liberty?"

"Take advantage of it, of course," replied Alcide, "and go quietly to Tomsk to see what is going on there."

"Until the time very near, I hope—when we may rejoin some Russian regiment."

"As you say, my dear Blount, it won't do to Tartarize ourselves too much. The best side is that of the most civilized army, and it is evident that the people of central Asia will have everything to lose and absolutely nothing to gain from this invasion, while the Russians will soon repulse them. It is only a matter of time."

The arrival of Ivan Ogareff, which had given Jolivet and Blount their liberty, was to Michael Strogoff, on the contrary, a serious danger. Should chance bring the czar's courier into Ogareff's presence the latter could not fail to recognize in him the traveler whom he had so brutally treated at the Ichim posthouse, and, although Michael had not replied to the insult as he would have done under any other circumstances, attention would be drawn to him, and at once the accomplishment of his plans would be rendered more difficult.

woman, whose taciturnity seemed to keep her apart from all those who shared her fate. Not a murmur issued from her lips. She was like a statue of grief. This woman was more strictly guarded than any one else and, without her appearing to notice or even to suspect, was constantly watched by the gypsy Sangarre. Notwithstanding her age, she was compelled to follow the convoy of prisoners on foot, without any alleviation of her suffering.

However, a kind Providence had placed near her a courageous, kind hearted being to comfort and assist her. Among her companions in misfortune a young girl, remarkable for her beauty and a taciturnity equal to that of the Siberian, seemed to have given herself the task of watching over her. No words had been exchanged between the two captives, but the girl was always found at the old woman's side just when her help was useful. At first the mute assistance of the stranger was not accepted without some mistrust. Gradually, however, the young girl's clear glance, her reserve and the mysterious sympathy which draws together those who are in misfortune thawed Marfa's coldness.

Nadia—for it was she—was thus able without knowing it to render to the mother those attentions which she had herself received from the son. Her instinctive kindness had doubly inspired her. In devoting herself to her service Nadia secured for her youth and beauty the protection afforded by the age of the old prisoner.

On the crowd of unhappy people, imbibed by sufferings, this silent pair—on the one hand the grandmother, the other the granddaughter—imposed a sort of respect.

After being carried off by the Tartar scouts on the Irish Nadia had been taken to Omsk. Kept a prisoner in the town, she shared the fate of all those captured by Ivan Ogareff and consequently that of Marfa Strogoff.

Thanks to her young companion, Marfa Strogoff was able to follow the soldiers who guarded the prisoners without being fastened to a saddle bow, as were many other unfortunate wretches, and thus dragged along this road of sorrow.

"May God reward you, my daughter, for what you have done for my old age," said Marfa Strogoff once, and for some time these were the only words exchanged between the two unfortunate beings.

Nadia also, if not completely silent, spoke little.

However, one day her heart overflowed, and she told, without concealing anything, all the events which had occurred from her departure from Vladimir to the death of Nicholas Korpanoff. All that her young companion told intensely interested the old Siberian.

"Nicholas Korpanoff?" said she. "Tell me again about Nicholas. I know only one man, one alone, among all the youth of the time in whom such conduct would not have astonished me. Nicholas Korpanoff? Was that really his name? Are you sure of it, my daughter?"

"Why should he have deceived me in this," replied Nadia, "when he deceived me in no other way?"

Moved, however, by a kind of presentiment, Marfa Strogoff put questions upon questions to Nadia.

"You told me he was fearless, my daughter. You have proved that he has been so," said she.

"Yes, fearless indeed," replied Nadia. "It was just what my son would have done," said Marfa to herself.

Then she resumed:

"Did you not say that nothing stopped him, nothing astonished him, that he was so gentle in his strength that you had a sister as well as a brother in him and that he watched over you like a mother?"

"Yes, yes," said Nadia; "brother, sister, mother—he has been all to me."

"And defended you like a lion?"

"A lion indeed," replied Nadia. "Yes, a lion, a hero."

"My son, my son!" thought the old Siberian. "But do you say that he has submitted to a terrible affront in the posthouse of Ichim?"

"He has borne with it," answered Nadia, lowering her head.

"Has he submitted to it?" murmured Marfa Strogoff, trembling with fear.

"Mother, mother," cried Nadia, "do not condemn him. There is a secret there of which God alone is the judge at the present time!"

"And," said Marfa, raising her head and looking at Nadia as though she desired to read the depth of her soul in this hour of humiliation, "have you despised this Nicholas Korpanoff?"

"Not!" cried Marfa. "You dare to tell me not?"

"I have said it, but it remains for me to inform you that from motives unknown to me, which had to guide him before every other consideration I was given to understand that Nicholas Korpanoff had to traverse the country in the most absolute secrecy. It was for him a question of life and of death and, more sacred still, a question of duty and honor."

"Of duty in reality, of impetuous duty," said the old Siberian, "of that kind for which a person sacrifices everything, for the accomplishment of which he would deny himself everything, even the joy of coming to give a kiss, the last perhaps, to his old mother. All that you do not know, Nadia, all that I did not know myself at this moment I know. You have made me understand all. But the light which you have thrown into the deepest darkness of my heart, that light, alas, I may not cause to enter your own. The secret of my son, Nadia, since he has not told it to you, I must keep for him. Forgive me, Nadia. The good deed you have done me I cannot return to you."

"Mother, I ask nothing from you," answered Nadia.

All was thus explained to the old Siberian, all, even the inexplicable conduct of her son with regard to herself in the Inn at Omsk in presence of the witnesses of their meeting. There was no doubt that the young girl's companion was Michael Strogoff and that a secret mission, some important dispatch to be carried across the invaded country, obliged him to conceal his quality of the czar's courier.

"Ah, my brave boy!" thought Marfa. "No, I will not betray you, and tortures shall not wrest from me the avowal that it was you whom I saw at Omsk."

Marfa could with a word have paid Nadia for all her devotion to her. She could have told her that her companion, Nicholas Korpanoff, or, rather, Michael Strogoff, had not perished in the waters of the Irtysh, since it was some days after that incident that she had met him, that she had spoken to him. But she restrained herself, she was silent and contented herself with saying:

"Hope, my child. Misfortune will not overwhelm you. You will see your father again. I feel it. And perhaps he who gave you the name of sister is not dead. God cannot have allowed your brave companion to perish. Hope, my child, hope. Do as I do. The mourning which I wear is not yet for my son."

Such was now the situation of Marfa Strogoff and Nadia toward each other. The old Siberian had understood all, and if the young girl was ignorant of the fact that her companion so much regretted still lived she knew at least the relationship which he held toward her whom she had made her mother, and she thanked God for having given her that joy and pleasure thus to be able to replace at the side of the prisoner that son whom she had lost.

But that which neither the one nor the other could know was that Michael Strogoff, taken at Kalyan, was one of the same convoy and was bound like themselves for Tomsk.

At length, on the 15th of August, toward evening, the convoy reached the little town of Zabeldro, some thirty verst from Tomsk. At this place the route again lay along the course of the Tom.

All this night the prisoners were to camp on the banks of the Tom. The emir, in fact, had deferred until the next day the entry of his troops into Tomsk. It had been decided that a military display should mark the inauguration of the Tartar headquarters in this important city. Feofar-Khan already occupied its fortress, but the body of his army bivouacked under the walls, waiting for the moment to make a solemn entry.

Ivan Ogareff had left the emir at Tomsk, where they had both arrived the evening before, and he returned to the encampment at Zabeldro. Next day he had to start from this place with the rear guard of the Tartar army. A house had been placed at his disposal where he could stay the night. At sunrise, under his command, horse and foot set out for Tomsk, where the emir wished to receive them with all the pomp and display of an Asiatic sovereign.

When the orders for a halt had been given, the prisoners, worn out with a three days' journey, a prey to the most burning thirst, could at length quench their thirst and take some repose.

The sun had already set, but the horizon was still lighted up by the twilight, when Nadia, supporting Marfa Strogoff, reached the banks of the Tom. The two had not been able so far to penetrate the ranks of those who thronged the high bank, and they came to drink in their turn.

The old Siberian bent over the fresh stream, and Nadia, having plunged her hands into it, carried it to the lips of Marfa. Then she refreshed herself in her turn. The cold water of the pure stream seemed to give back life to the old woman and the young girl. Suddenly Nadia, as she left the banks, straightened herself. An involuntary cry escaped her lips.

Michael Strogoff was there and only some paces from her! It was he!

At the cry of Nadia Michael Strogoff had started, but he had sufficient command of himself not to utter a word which could compromise him.

And yet at the very moment that Nadia had recognized him he had recognized his mother. Michael Strogoff at this unexpected meeting, not feeling himself to be any longer master of himself, raised his hand to his eyes and immediately left the spot. Nadia was instinctively hastening forward to rejoin him when the old Siberian whispered these words in her ear:

"Stay, my daughter!"

"It is he!" answered Nadia in a voice trembling with emotion. "He lives, mother! It is he!"

To be continued.

CHAPTER XI.

It was 2 o'clock in the afternoon on the 12th of August, under a hot sun and cloudless sky, that the topschil-baschi gave the order to start.

Alcide and Blount, having bought horses, had already taken the road to Tomsk.

Among the prisoners brought by Ivan Ogareff to the Tartar camp was an old