

THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

"It is my son," answered Marfa Strogoff; "it is Michael Strogoff, and you see that I do not take one step toward him. Follow my example."

Michael Strogoff had just experienced one of the most violent emotions which it is ever given to man to feel. His mother and Nadia were there. Those two prisoners, each of whom seemed to hold the first place in his heart, were there joined with him in one common misfortune. Did Nadia know who he was? No, for he had seen the gesture of Marfa Strogoff holding her back at the moment she was about to rush upon him. Marfa Strogoff had understood all and kept her secret.

Michael Strogoff could then hope that this fresh and unexpected meeting at the camp of Zabeldeiro would have no injurious consequences either for his mother nor for himself, but he did not know that certain particulars of that scene, rapidly as it had passed, had been gained by Sangarre, the spy of Ivan Ogareff.

The gypsy was there, a few paces from the bank, watching as ever the old Siberian, without her suspecting it. She had not been able to perceive Michael Strogoff, who had already disappeared when she turned round, but the gesture of the mother, withholding Nadia, had not escaped her, and a light from Marfa's eyes told her everything.

There was no longer any doubt that the son of Marfa Strogoff, the courier of the czar, was now at Zabeldeiro among the prisoners of Ivan Ogareff.

Sangarre did not know him, but she knew he was there. She did not then attempt to discover him, a thing which would have been impossible in the midst of this numerous crowd.

As for again spying after Nadia and Marfa Strogoff, this was equally useless. It was evident that these two women would be on their guard, and it would be impossible to seize by surprise anything of a nature to compromise the courier of the czar.

The gypsy had then only one thought—to warn Ivan Ogareff. Wherefore she immediately left the camp.

A quarter of an hour afterward she arrived at Zabeldeiro and was shown into the house occupied by the lieutenant of the emir.

Ivan Ogareff immediately received the gypsy.

"What do you wish, Sangarre?" he asked.

"The son of Marfa Strogoff is at the camp," answered Sangarre.

"A prisoner?"

"A prisoner."

"Ah," cried Ivan Ogareff, "I knew!"

"You knew nothing, Ivan," said the gypsy, "for you do not even know him."

"But do you know him? You have seen him, Sangarre?"

"I have not seen him, but I saw his mother betray herself by a movement which has told me everything."

"Do you not deceive yourself?"

"I do not."

"You know the importance I attach to the arrest of this courier," said Ivan Ogareff. "If the letter which was sent to him from Moscow reaches Irkutsk, and it should be handed to the grand duke, the grand duke would be on his guard, and I should not be able to catch him. I must have this letter at any price. Now, you have just told me that the bearer of this letter is in my power. I repeat it, Sangarre, do you not deceive yourself?"

Ivan Ogareff had spoken with great animation. His emotion bore testimony to the extreme importance he attached to the possession of this letter. Sangarre was not at all troubled with the persistency of the fresh inquiry.

"I am not deceived, Ivan," she answered.

"But, Sangarre, there are at the camp several thousand prisoners, and you say you do not know Michael Strogoff?"

"No," answered the gypsy, whose face lighted up with a savage joy. "I indeed do not know him, but his mother does. Ivan, we must force the mother to speak."

"Tomorrow she shall speak!" said Ogareff.

Then he held out his hand to the gypsy, and she kissed it, without there being in this act of respect habitual to the people of the north anything degrading or servile.

Sangarre returned to the camp. She found the place occupied by Nadia and Marfa Strogoff and passed the night in watching them both, with her ears open for any information. She could hear nothing. By an instinctive feeling of prudence not a word was exchanged between Nadia and Marfa Strogoff.

CHAPTER XII.

THE next day, the 16th of August, the loud-tongued trumpets sounded through the camp. The Tartar soldiers spring at once to arms.

Ivan Ogareff, after having quitted Zabeldeiro, arrived, accompanied by a numerous staff of Tartar soldiers. His face was more serious than usual, and his contracted outlines indicated a great anger, which was only wanting for some object on which to

hurl itself.

Michael Strogoff, lost in a group of prisoners, saw this man pass by. He had a presentiment that a great calamity was about to happen, for Ivan Ogareff now knew that Marfa Strogoff was the mother of Michael Strogoff, captain in the corps of the couriers of the czar.

Ivan Ogareff arrived at the center of the camp, dismounted from his horse, and the horsemen of his escort formed a large circle around him.

At that moment Sangarre approached and said:

"I have nothing new of which to inform you, Ivan."

Ivan Ogareff answered only in giving a short command to one of his officers. Immediately the ranks of the prisoners were traversed in a brutal manner by the soldiers. Those unfortunate ones, urged on with blows and pushed with the wood of the lances, quickly arranged themselves along the outer edge of the camp. Four lines of infantry and cavalry drawn up at the back rendered all escape impossible.

Order for silence was at once given, and at a sign from Ivan Ogareff Sangarre directed her steps toward the group in the middle of which was Marfa Strogoff.

The old Siberian saw her coming. She understood what was about to happen. A disdaintful smile played on her lips. Then, turning to Nadia, she said to her in a low voice:

"You do not know me any longer, my daughter. Whatever happens and how ever trying may be this examination, not a word, not a gesture—it is for him, not for me, they search."

At this moment Sangarre, after having looked around for an instant, placed her hand upon the shoulder of the old Siberian.

"What do you wish from me?" said Marfa Strogoff.

"Come," answered Sangarre.

And, pushing her with her hand, she led her into the middle of the reserved space before Ivan Ogareff.

Michael Strogoff kept his eyelashes half closed in order that the brightness of his eyes should not betray him.

Marfa Strogoff, having come in front of Ivan Ogareff, straightened her person, crossed her arms and waited.

"Are you indeed Marfa Strogoff?" demanded Ivan Ogareff.

"Yes," answered the old Siberian, with calmness.

"Have you changed your mind as regards the statement you made to me when, three days ago, I interrogated you at Omsk?"

"No."

"So you are ignorant of the fact that your son, Michael Strogoff, courier of the czar, has passed through Omsk?"

"I am ignorant of it."

"And that the man that you believed to have recognized as your son at the posthouse was not he—was not your son?"

"He was not my son."

"Do you not see him since among the prisoners?"

"No."

"And if he were shown to you would you recognize him?"

"No."

At this answer, which showed an inflexible determination to avow nothing, a murmur of approbation arose from the crowd.

Ivan Ogareff could not restrain a menacing gesture.

"Listen," said he to Marfa Strogoff. "Your son is here, and you go at once to point him out."

"No."

"All these men, taken at Omsk and at Kalyan, are going to die before your eyes, and if you do not point out Michael Strogoff you shall receive as many blows of the knout as there shall be men who have passed before you."

Ivan Ogareff had now realized that, whatever threats he might utter and to whatever tortures he might subject her, the indomitable Siberian would not speak.

To discover the courier of the czar he now counted not upon her, but upon Michael Strogoff himself. He did not believe it possible that when the mother and the son should be brought into the presence of each other an irresistible impulse would not betray them. Certainly if he had only wished to gain possession of the Imperial letter he could simply have given orders for all these prisoners to be searched. But Michael Strogoff might have destroyed this letter after learning its contents, and if he were not recognized and he should gain Irkutsk the plans of Ivan Ogareff would be all frustrated. Wherefore it was not only the letter which he must have, from the traitor; he must have the bearer of it.

Nadia at length understood all, and she now knew who was Michael Strogoff and why he had wished to traverse, without being known, the invaded provinces of Siberia.

On the order of Ivan Ogareff the prisoners passed one by one before Marfa Strogoff, who remained immovable as a statue and whose regard expressed only the most complete indifference.

Her son was in the last ranks. When in his turn he passed before his mother, Nadia shut her eyes in order not to see him.

Michael Strogoff had remained apparently impassible, but his hands were bleeding from the pressure of the fet-

ters. Ivan Ogareff was conquered by the son and the mother.

Sangarre placed near him, only said one word—"Knout!"

"Yes," cried Ivan Ogareff, "let this old jade have the knout and let the punishment continue until she die!"

A Tartar soldier, carrying that terrible instrument of torture, approached Marfa Strogoff.

The knout is composed of a certain number of leather thongs, to the ends of which are attached twisted iron wire. One can easily understand that to be condemned to receive a hundred and twenty blows from such a whip is the same thing as to be condemned to death. Marfa Strogoff knew it, but she also knew that no torture upon earth could make her speak, and she had already offered the sacrifice of her life for her son's safety.

Marfa Strogoff, having been seized by two soldiers, was thrown on her knees on the ground. Her robe, having been torn, exposed her naked back. A saber was fixed before her breast at the distance of only a few inches, and in case she should bend under the pain her breast would be pierced with the sharp point.

The Tartar raised the lash. He was waiting.

"Go on!" said Ivan Ogareff.

The whip hissed in the air, but before the blow had fallen a powerful hand had wrenched it from the hands of the Tartar.

Michael Strogoff was there! He had leaped before this horrible scene! If at the posthouse of Ichim he had restrained himself at the blow from Ivan Ogareff, here before his mother, who was about to be struck, he was not able to master himself.

Ivan Ogareff had succeeded.

"Michael Strogoff!" he cried.

Then, advancing, he said:

"Ah, was this done by the mat of Ichim?"

"Himself!" said Michael Strogoff, and, raising the knout, he tore with it the face of Ivan Ogareff himself.

"Blow for blow!"

"Well given!" cried the voice of a spectator, who fortunately hid himself in the tumult.

Twenty soldiers threw themselves on Michael Strogoff, and they were about to kill him. But Ivan Ogareff, from whom a cry of pain and rage had escaped, stopped them with a motion of his hand.

"This man is reserved for the justice of the emir!"

The letter to the Imperial armies was found in the breast of Michael Strogoff, who had not had time to destroy it, and it was handed over to Ivan Ogareff.

The spectator who had uttered aloud those words "well given" was no other than Alcide Jolivet. His companion and himself, having waited at the camp of Zabeldeiro, were present at this scene.

"My God," said he to Harry Blount, "these people of the north are rough men! Do we not owe some return to our companion of the journey? What splendid revenge for the affair of Ichim!"

"Yes, revenge indeed," said Harry Blount. "But Strogoff is a dead man. For his sake it would perhaps be better not to remember him any longer."

"And allow his mother to perish under this knout?"

"Do you believe that he has acted better by his rash haste than his mother and his sister?"

"I don't believe anything. I know nothing," answered Alcide Jolivet, "only had I been in his place I should not have acted otherwise. What a slash! Eh, what—the devil, we must boil over sometimes. God would have placed water in our veins and not blood had he wished us to remain always and everywhere imperturbable."

"What a splendid incident for a newspaper article!" said Harry Blount. "If Ivan Ogareff would only communicate to us the contents of that letter!"

Ivan Ogareff, after having wiped off the blood which covered his face, had broken the seal of the letter. He read it again and again for a long time, as if he wished to fathom its contents.

Then, having given his orders that Michael Strogoff, strongly fettered, should be sent on to Tomsk with the other prisoners, he took command of the troops encamped at Zabeldeiro, and amid the deafening sounds of drums and trumpets he marched to the town where the emir was awaiting him.

He had not long to wait for the lieutenant of Feofar. Resounding bugles announced his arrival.

Ivan Ogareff, the Hashed, as they already began to call him—dressed this time in the uniform of a Tartar officer, arrived on horseback before the tent of the emir. He was accompanied by a body of the soldiers from the camp of Zabeldeiro, who drew up along the sides of the plateau, in the middle of which he remained only during the time allotted to the amusements. One could see a deep gash cutting obliquely the face of the traitor.

Ivan Ogareff presented to the emir his principal officers, and Feofar-Khan, without departing from the coldness which was the main foundation of his dignity, received them in a manner which made them satisfied with their reception.

Alcide Jolivet and Harry Blount then joined the crowd and looked on in such a manner as not to lose any detail of a feast, which was to furnish a hundred good lines for the newspapers. They gazed with astonishment on Feofar-Khan in his magnificence, his women, his officers, his guards and all this oriental pomp, of which the ceremonies of Europe can give no idea. But they turned away with disdain when Ivan Ogareff presented himself before the emir, and they waited, not without some impatience, for the feast to begin.

"Do you see, my dear Blount," said Alcide Jolivet, "we are come too soon. Like good citizens who must needs come

or lose their money. All this is only the rising of the curtain. It would have been better taste to have arrived only for the ballet."

"What ballet?" asked Harry Blount.

"The obligatory ballet, faith. But I think the curtain is about to rise."

Alcide Jolivet spoke as if he were at the opera, and, taking his glass from his case, he prepared to have a look at, as a connoisseur, the first subjects of Feofar's troop.

But a tedious ceremony was to precede the amusements.

Meanwhile most of the prisoners had passed before the emir, and in passing each of them had to prostrate the forehead to touch the very dust as a sign of servility. It was the slavery which commenced with humiliation. When the unfortunates were too slow in bending, the rude hand of the guards cast them violently to the earth. Alcide Jolivet and his companion could not assist at such a spectacle without feeling the greatest indignation.

"This is cowardly! Let us go away!" said Alcide Jolivet.

"No," replied Harry Blount; "we must see all."

"See all! Ah!" cried Alcide Jolivet suddenly, seizing the arm of his companion.

"What is the matter with you?" asked the former.

"Look! Blount, it is she!"

"She?"

"The sister of our fellow traveler. Alone and a prisoner! We must save her!"

"Restrain yourself," coldly replied Harry Blount. "Our intervention in behalf of this young girl would be more hurtful than useful to her."

Alcide Jolivet, ready to rush forward, stopped himself, and Nadia, who had not perceived them, being half veiled by her hair, passed in her turn before the emir, without attracting his attention.

In the meantime, after Nadia, Marfa Strogoff had arrived, and as she did not throw herself quickly enough into the dust the guards brutally pushed her.

Marfa Strogoff fell.

In her son made a terrible movement, which the soldiers who were guarding him could with difficulty master.

But old Marfa raised herself, and they were about to drag her when Ivan Ogareff intervened, saying:

"Let this woman remain!"

As for Nadia, she was thrown back among the crowd of prisoners. The look of Ivan Ogareff had not fixed itself upon her.

Michael Strogoff was then led before the emir, and there he remained erect, without lowering his eyes.

"Your face to the ground!" Ivan Ogareff cried out to him.

"No!" replied Michael Strogoff. Two guards wished to force him to bend, but it was they who were thrown to the ground by the hand of the robust young man.

Ivan Ogareff advanced toward Michael Strogoff.

"You are about to die," said he.

"I shall die," merely answered Michael Strogoff, "but your face of traitor, Ivan, will not the less bear and forever the infamous mark of the knout!"

Ivan Ogareff at this answer became horribly pale.

"Who is this prisoner?" demanded the emir in a voice the more menacing because of its calmness.

"A Russian spy," answered Ivan Ogareff.

In making out Michael Strogoff a spy he knew the sentence pronounced against him would be the more terrible.

Michael Strogoff moved toward Ivan Ogareff.

The emir then made a gesture before which the whole crowd bent their heads. Afterward he motioned with his hand for the Koran, which was brought to him. He opened the book and placed his finger on one of the pages.

It was chance, or, rather, as these orientals think, God himself, who was about to decide the fate of Michael Strogoff. The people of central Asia give the name of "fat" to this practice. After having interpreted the sense of the verse touched by the finger of the judge they apply the sentence, whatever it may be.

The emir had left his finger resting on the page of the Koran. The chief of the ulemas, then approaching, read with a loud voice a verse which finished with these words:

"And he shall see no more the things of the earth." "Russian spy," said Feofar-Khan, "you came to see what is passing in the camp of the Tartars! Look, then, with all your eyes! Look!"

CHAPTER XIII.

MICHAEL STROGOFF, with his hands bound, was held in front of the emir's throne at the foot of the terrace.

His mother, overcome at last by so many physical and moral tortures, had sunk down, not daring to look or listen any longer.

"Look with all your eyes! Look!" Feofar-Khan had said, stretching out his threatening hand toward Michael Strogoff.

Without doubt Ivan Ogareff, knowing well the Tartar customs, had understood the bearing of that word, for his lips parted for an instant in a cruel smile. Then he went to take his place near Feofar-Khan.

A call of trumpets was heard immediately. It was the signal for the amusements.

"Now we have the ballet," said Alcide Jolivet to Harry Blount; "but, contrary to all custom, these barbarians give it before the drama."

Michael Strogoff had been ordered to look. He did look. A swarm of female dancers came upon the space reserved for them. Various Tartar instruments, united with the guttural voices of the

singers, formed a strange harmony. There were a mandolin with a long neck made of the wood of the mulberry tree, with two strings of twisted silk, a kind of violoncello, open at the back, furnished with horsehair and made to vibrate with a bow, a long flute made of a reed, trumpets, tambourines and tom-toms. At once the dances began.

These dances performed very gracefully various dances, sometimes singly and sometimes in groups. They had their faces uncovered, but from time to time they drew a light veil over their figures, and one would have said that a cloud of gauze was passing over their sparkling eyes like a vapor over the starry heaven.

When this first entertainment was over, a grave voice was heard, which said: "Look with all your eyes! Look!"

The man who repeated these words of the emir, a Tartar of high stature, was the chief executioner of Feofar-Khan. He had taken his position behind Michael Strogoff, and he held in his hand a sword with a broad and curved blade, one of those Damascus blades which had been tempered by the famous armorers of Karschi or of Hissar.

Near him some guards had brought a tripod on which was placed an iron dish, where some red-hot coals were burning without emitting any smoke. The light crust which crowned them was due only to the incineration of a resinous and aromatic substance, a mixture of frankincense and benzoin, which had been thrown on their surface.

Meanwhile another group of dancers had succeeded the first, but of a race very different, which Michael Strogoff at once recognized.

And we must believe that the two journalists also recognized them, for Harry Blount said to his confrere:

"These are the Zingari of Nijal Novgorod."

"The very ones!" cried Alcide Jolivet. "I imagine their eyes bring more money to these spies than their legs!"

And in making them out to be agents in the service of the emir Alcide Jolivet, it is well known, did not deceive himself.

In the first rank of the gypsies figured Sangarre, in her superb costume, strange and picturesque as it was, which set off still more her beauty.

Sangarre did not dance, but stood in the middle of her dancing girls, whose fantastic steps partook of all the countries which their race had traversed in Europe, of Bohemia, of Egypt, of Italy and of Spain. They became animated at the noise of the cymbals which changed on their arms and at the swelling of the "shairs," a kind of drum sounded by the fingers.

Sangarre, holding one of these daïres, which trembled between her hands, excited this troop of veritable courtesans.

Then came forward a youthful gypsy, some fifteen years old at most. He held in his hand a doutra, the two cords of which he made to vibrate by a simple gliding of the nails. He sang. During the couplet of his song of fantastic rhythm a danseuse came and placed herself near him and remained immovable, listening to him, but each time the burden came to the lips of the young singer she again took up her interrupted dance, shaking her hair near him and deafening him with the sound of her drum.

Then, after the last verse, the dancers enlivened the gypsy in a thousand turnings of their dances.

At this moment a shower of gold fell from the hands of the emir and his allies, from the hands of the officers of all grades, and to the noise of the pieces which struck the cymbals of the dancers were blended the last murmurs of the doutras and tambourines.

"Prodigal as freebooters!" said Alcide Jolivet in the ear of his companion.

And, indeed, it was stolen money which fell in showers, for with the Tartar tomans and sequins rained also Muscovite ducats and rubles.

Then silence was made for an instant, and the voice of the executioner, placing his hand on the shoulder of Michael Strogoff, again spoke those words whose repetition rendered them still more sinister:

"Look with all your eyes! Look!"

But this time Alcide Jolivet observed that the executioner did not hold his naked sword in his hand.

Then suddenly, as if at a given signal, all the fires of the fantasia were extinguished, the dances ceased, the dancers disappeared. The ceremony was terminated, and the torches alone lit up the plateau which some instants before was so full of lights.

At a sign from the emir Michael Strogoff was led into the middle of the square.

Little desirous of assisting at the torture reserved for this unfortunate man, Harry Blount and Alcide Jolivet then re-entered the city.

An hour later they were hastening along the road to Irkutsk, and it was among the Russians they would attempt to follow what Alcide Jolivet called by anticipation "the campaign of revenge."

The emir made a gesture. Michael Strogoff, pushed by the guards, approached the terrace, and then in that Tartar language which he understood Feofar said to him:

"Russian spy, you are come to see. You have seen for the last time. In an instant thine eyes shall be forever shut to the light!"

It was not with death, but with blindness that Michael Strogoff was about to be stricken. Loss of sight, more terrible perhaps than loss of life! The unhappy man was condemned to lose his eyesight.

Nevertheless on hearing the penalty pronounced by the emir Michael Strogoff did not become weak. He remained impassible, his large eyes open, as if he were wishing to concentrate all his life in this one last look.

To ask for pity from these fierce men was useless and, besides, unworthy of

him. He did not even think of it. All his thought was concentrated on his mission that had irrevocably failed, on his mother, on Nadia, whom he should never see again! But he did not allow to be seen any of the emotion which he felt.

Besides, the feeling of vengeance, to be accomplished at some future time, carried away his whole being.

"Ivan," said he, with a menacing voice, "Ivan, the traitor, the last threat of my eyes shall be for thee."

Ivan Ogareff shrugged his shoulders. But Michael Strogoff deceived himself. It was not in looking at Ivan Ogareff that his eyes were to be fixed never more to open.

Marfa Strogoff came and stood before him.

"My mother," cried he. "Yes, yes, on thee must be turned my last look and not on this miserable man! Remain there before me, that I may still see thy beloved figure; that my eyes may close while looking at thee!"

The old Siberian, without uttering a word, came forward.

"Drive away this woman!" said Ivan Ogareff.

Two soldiers pushed back Marfa Strogoff. She drew back, but remained standing some paces distant from her son.

The executioner appeared. This time he held his naked sword in his hand. That sword, heated to a white heat, had just drawn from the iron pan where the perfumed coals were burning.

Michael Strogoff was about to be made blind according to the Tartar custom, with a heated blade passed over his eyes!

Michael Strogoff did not seek to resist. Nothing else existed in his eyes than his mother, whom he devoured then with his look. All his life was in this last vision.

Marfa Strogoff, with her eyes wide open and her arms stretched toward him, was looking at him.

The white heated blade passed over the eyes of Michael Strogoff.

A loud cry of despair was heard. Old Marfa fell lifeless to the earth!

Michael Strogoff was blind.

His orders having been executed, the emir retired with all his household.

Soon there only remained on the plateau Ivan Ogareff and the torchbearers.