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THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

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 Opreff 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—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 flashed 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 an 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 employe, 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 employe, 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 Krasnoarsk, but it works yet between Kalyvan and the Russian frontier."

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

Michael Strogoff was going to answer 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, butrunning the other, he was at the window of the stocical employe. 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 Kalyvan 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 employe, and with undisturbed sang froid he commenced to telegraph the following dispatch:

Daily Telegraph, London: From Kalyvan, Government of Omsk, Siberia, Aug. 6.—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 quietly:

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 hundred 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 employe 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 city. The earth was without rest 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 employe, 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 refugees 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 absentminded 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 wicket and, as his colleague had done, placed a respectable pile of rubles on the desk and handed his dispatch, which the employe read aloud:

Madeleine Jolivet, 10 Faubourg Montmartre, Paris: Kalyvan, Government of Omsk, Aug. 6.—Russian army in the city. Russians beaten. Furious pursuit by the Tartars.

And when Harry Blount came back he heard Alcide Jolivet completing his telegram, singing musingly with mock ery:

To be Continued. Marriage broodens some men and flattens others.

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