

Michael Strogoff,

OR, THE COURIER OF THE CZAR.

By Jules Verne.

CHAPTER I.

"Sire, a fresh despatch." "Whence?" "From Tomsk."

"Is the wire cut beyond that city?" "Yes, sire, since yesterday."

"Telegraph hourly to Tomsk, General, and let me be kept au courant of all that occurs."

"Sire, it shall be done," answered General Kiosoff.

"These words were exchanged about two hours after midnight, at the moment when the fete given at the New Palace was at the height of its splendour."

"During the whole evening the bands of the Preobrazhensky and Paulovsky regiments had played without cessation polkas, mazurkas, schottisches, and waltzes from among the choicest of their repertoires."

"The grand-chamberlain of the court was, besides, well seconded in his arduous and delicate duties. The grand-dukes and their sides-de-camp, the chamberlains-in-waiting and other officers of the palace, presided personally in the arrangement of the dances."

"The grand-duchesses, covered with diamonds, the ladies-in-waiting in their most exquisite costumes, set the example to the wives of the military and civil dignitaries of the ancient city of white stone."

"When, therefore, the signal for the 'polonaise' resounded through the saloons, and the guests of all ranks took part in that measured promenade, which on occasions of this kind has all the importance of a national dance, the mingled costumes, the sweeping robes adorned with lace, and uniforms covered with orders, presented a scene of dazzling and indescribable splendor, lighted by hundreds of lustres multiplied tenfold by reflection in the numerous mirrors adorning the walls."

"The grand saloon, the finest of all those contained in the New Palace, formed to this procession of exalted personages and splendidly-dressed women a frame worthy of the magnificence they displayed."

"The rich ceiling, with its gliding already softened by the touch of time, appeared as if glittering with stars. The embroidered drapery of the curtains and doors, falling in gorgeous folds, assumed rich and varied hues, broken by the shadows of the heavy masses of damask."

"The traitor, Ivan Ogareff, are there no tidings of him?" "None," replied General Kiosoff.

"Let a description of him be immediately dispatched to Nijni, Novgorod, Perm, Ekaterenburg, Kasimov, Tioumen, Ishim, Omsk, Elansky, Kabayan, Tomsk, and to all the telegraph stations with which communication is yet open."

"Your Majesty's orders shall be instantly carried out," replied General Kiosoff.

"You will observe the strictest silence as to this."

The General, having made a sign of respectful assent, bowing low, mingled for a short time with the crowd, and finally left the apartments without his departure being remarked.

The officer remained absorbed in thought for a few minutes, when, recovering himself, he went among the various groups formed in different parts of the saloon, his countenance assuming that calm aspect which had for an instant been disturbed.

Nevertheless, the important occurrence which had occasioned these rapidly exchanged words was not so unknown as the officer of Chasseurs of the Guard and General Kiosoff had possibly supposed.

It was not spoken of officially, it is true, nor even officially, since tongues were not free; but a few exalted personages had been informed, more or less exactly, of the events which had taken place beyond the frontier.

At any rate, that which was not slightly known, that which was not matter of conversation even between members of the corps diplomatique, two guests, distinguished by no uniform, no decoration, at this reception in the New Palace, discussed in a low voice, with apparently very correct information.

By what means, by the exercise of what acuteness had these two ordinary mortals ascertained that which so many persons of the highest rank and importance scarcely even suspected? It is impossible to say.

Had they the gifts of foresight and fore-knowledge? Did they possess a supplementary sense, which enabled them to see beyond that limited horizon which bounds all human gaze? Had they obtained a peculiar power of divining the most secret events? Was it owing to the habits now become a second nature, of living on information and by information, that their mental constitution had thus become really transformed?

Of these two ordinary men the one was English, the other French; both were tall and thin, but the latter was sallow, as are the southern Provençals, while the former was ruddy like a Lancashire gentleman.

"I have telegraphed already, 'splendid'!" replied Harry Blount calmly, employing the word specially devoted to expressing admiration by all subjects of the United Kingdom.

"Nevertheless," added Alcide Jolivet, "I felt compelled to remark to my cousin—"

"Your cousin?" repeated Harry Blount, in a tone of surprise, interrupting his brother of the pen.

"Yes," returned Alcide Jolivet, "my cousin Madeleine. It is with her I correspond, and she likes to be quickly and well informed of my cousin's doings."

"I therefore remarked to her that, during this fete, a sort of cloud had appeared to overshadow the sovereign's brow."

"To me it seemed radiant," replied Harry Blount, who perhaps wished to conceal his real opinion on this topic.

"And naturally you made it 'radiant' in the columns of the Daily Telegraph."

"Exactly."

"Do you remember, Mr. Blount, what occurred at Zakret in 1812?"

"I remember it as well as if I had been there, sir," replied the English correspondent.

"Then," continued Alcide Jolivet, "you know that, in the middle of the fete given in his honor, it was announced to the Emperor Alexander that Napoleon had just crossed the Niemen with the vanguard of the French army."

Nevertheless the Emperor did not leave the fete, and notwithstanding the gravity of the intelligence, which might cost his empire, he did not allow himself to show more uneasiness!

"Then you know also that orders have been sent to the troops of Nikolaevsk?"

"I do, sir; and at the same time a telegram was sent to the 'Cossacks of the government of Tobolsk to concentrate their forces.'"

"Nothing can be more true, Mr. Blount: I was equally well acquainted with the measures, and you may be sure that my dear cousin shall know something of them tomorrow."

"Exactly as the readers of the Daily Telegraph shall know it also, M. Jolivet."

"Well, when one sees all that is going on—"

"And when one hears all that is being said—"

"An interesting campaign to follow, Mr. Blount."

"I shall follow it, M. Jolivet."

"When it is possible that we shall find ourselves on ground less safe, perhaps, than the floor of this ballroom."

"Less safe, certainly, but—"

"But much less slippery," added Alcide Jolivet, holding up his companion, just as the latter, drawing back, was about to lose his equilibrium.

Thereupon the correspondents separated, pleased enough to know that the one had not stolen a march on the other.

"At that moment the doors of the rooms adjoining the great reception saloon were thrown open, disclosing to view several immense tables beautifully laid out, and groaning under a profusion of valuable china and gold plate."

On the central table, reserved for the princes, princesses, and members of the corps diplomatique, glittered an epergne of inestimable price, brought from London and around this chef-d'œuvre, of chased gold were reflected, under the light of the lustres, a thousand pieces of the most beautiful service which the manufactories of Sevres had ever produced.

The guests of the New Palace immediately began to stream toward the supper-rooms.

At that moment General Kiosoff, who had just re-entered, quickly approached the officer of chasseurs.

"Well?" asked the latter abruptly, as he had done the former time.

"Telegrams pass Tomsk no longer, sire."

"A courier this moment!"

The officer left the ball and entered a large ante-chamber adjoining.

It was a cabinet with plain oak furniture, and situated in an angle of the New Palace. Several pictures, among others some by Horace Vernet, hung on the wall.

The officer hastily opened a window, as if he felt the want of air, and stepped out on a balcony to breathe the pure atmosphere of a lovely July night.

He caught his eyes, bathed in moonlight, lay a fortified inclosure, from which rose two cathedrals, three palaces, and an arsenal. Around this inclosure could be seen the distinct towns: Kitai-Gorod, Selvi-Gorod, Zemlani-Gorod, European, Tartar or Chinese quarters of great extent, commanded by towers, belfries, minarets, and the cupolas of three hundred churches, with green domes, surmounted by the silver cross.

A little winding river here and there reflected the rays of the moon. All this together formed a curious mosaic of variously colored houses set in an immense frame of tea-leaves in circumference.

This river was the Moskova; the town Moscow, the fortified inclosure the Kremlin, and the officer of Chasseurs of the Guard, who, with folded arms and thoughtful brow, was listening dreamily to the sounds floating from the New Palace over the old Muscovite city, was the Czar.

CHAPTER II.

The Czar had not so suddenly left the ball-room of the New Palace, when the fete he was giving to the civil and military authorities and principal people of Moscow was at the height of its brilliancy, without ample cause; for he had just received information that serious events were taking place beyond the frontiers of the Ural.

It had become evident that a formidable rebellion threatened to wrest the Siberian provinces from the Russian crown.

Asiatic Russia, or Siberia, covers a superficial area of 1,790,280 square miles, and contains nearly two millions of inhabitants.

Extending from the Ural mountains, which separate it from Russia in Europe, to the shores of the Pacific Ocean, it is bounded on the south by Turkistan and the Chinese Empire; on the north by the Arctic Ocean, from

the Sea of Kara, to Behring's Straits. It is divided into several governments or provinces, those of Tobolsk, Yeniseisk, Irkutsk, Omsk, and Yakutsk; contains two districts, Okhotsk, and Kamchatka; and possesses two countries, now under the Muscovite dominion—that of the Kirghiz and that of the Tshouktsches. This immense extent of steppe, which includes more than one hundred and ten degrees from west to east, is a land to which both criminals are transported and political offenders are banished.

Two governor-generals represent the supreme authority of the Czar over this vast country. One resided at Irkutsk, the capital of Western Siberia. The River Ychonna, a tributary of the Yenisei, separates the two Siberias.

No rail yet furrows these wide plains, some of which are in reality extremely fertile. No iron ways lead from these precious mines which make the Siberian soil far richer below than above its surface. The traveler journeys in Summer in a kibick or telgi; in Winter in a sledge.

An electric telegraph, with a single wire more than eight thousand versts in length, alone affords communication between the western and eastern frontiers of Siberia. An issuing from the Ural, it passes through Ekaterenburg, Kasimov, Tioumen, Ishim, Omsk, Elansk, Kalyvan, Tomsk, Krasnoarsk, Nijni-Udinsk, Irkutsk, Verkhne-Nertchinsk, Strelinsk, Albazine, Elagowstenka, Badde, Orlomskaya, Alexandrowsko, and Nikolaevsk; and six routes and nineteen copeaks are paid for every word sent from one end to the other.

From Irkutsk there is a branch to Kiakta, on the Mongolian frontier; and from thence, for thirty copeaks a word, the post conveys the dispatches to Pekin in a fortnight.

It was the wire, extending from Ekaterenburg to Nikolaevsk, which had been cut, first beyond Tomsk, and then between Tomsk and Kalyvan.

The verst contains 1165 yards. The rouble (silver) is worth 3s. 2d. The copeck (copper) rather more than a farthing.