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Minard's Liniment the best Hair Restorer.

THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

"It is possible that we shall meet you again in a few days at Omsk," said Blount.

"It is possible," answered Michael, "since I am going straight there."

"Well, I wish you a safe journey, Mr. Korpanoff," said Alcide.

Almost immediately the sound of a carriage was heard outside, the door was swung open and a man appeared. It was the traveler of the Berlin, a military looking man, apparently about forty years of age, tall, robust in figure, broad shouldered, with a strongly set head and thick mustache meeting red whiskers. He wore a plain uniform. A cavalry sabre hung at his side, and in his hand he held a short handled whip.

"Horses," he demanded, with the air of a man accustomed to command. "I have no more disposable horses," answered the postmaster, bowing. "I must have some this moment."

"It is impossible."

"What are those horses which have just been harnessed to the tarantass I saw at the door?"

"They belong to this traveler," answered the postmaster, pointing to Michael Strogoff.

"Take them out!" said the traveler in a tone which admitted of no reply.

Michael then advanced.

"These horses are engaged by me," he said.

"What does that matter? I must have them. Come, be quick; I have no time to lose."

"I have no time to lose either," replied Michael, endeavoring to be calm, but restraining himself with difficulty.

Nadia was near him, calm also, but secretly uneasy at a scene which it would have been better to avoid.

"Enough," said the traveler.

Then, going up to the postmaster:

"Let the horses be taken out of the tarantass and put into my Berlin," he exclaimed, with a threatening gesture.

The postmaster, much embarrassed, did not know whom to obey and looked at Michael, who evidently had the right to resist the unjust demands of the traveler.

Michael hesitated an instant. He did not wish to make use of his pistol, which would have drawn attention to him, and he was most unwilling either by giving up his horses to delay his journey, and yet it was important not to engage in a struggle which might compromise his mission.

The two reporters looked at him, ready to support him should he appeal to them.

"My horses will remain in my carriage," said Michael, but without raising his tone more than would be suitable for a plain Irkutsk merchant.

The traveler advanced toward Michael and laid his hand heavily on his shoulder.

"Is it so?" he said in a rough voice. "You will not give up your horses to me?"

"No," answered Michael.

"Very well, then they shall belong to whichever of us is able to start. Defend yourself, for I shall not spare you!"

So saying the traveler drew his sabre from its sheath, and Nadia threw herself before Michael.

Blount and Alcide Jolivet advanced toward him.

"I shall not fight," said Michael quietly, folding his arms across his chest. "You will not fight?"

"No."

"Not even after this?" exclaimed the traveler, and before any one could prevent him he struck Michael's shoulder with the handle of the whip. At this insult Michael turned deadly pale. His hands moved convulsively, as if he would have knocked the brute down. But by a tremendous effort he mastered himself. A duel! It was more than a delay; it was perhaps the failure of his mission. It would be better to lose some hours. Yes, but to swallow this affront!

"Will you fight now, coward?" repeated the traveler, adding coarseness to brutality.

"No," answered Michael, without moving, but looking the other straight in the face.

"The horses this moment," said the man and left the room. The postmaster followed him.

The effect produced on the reporters by this incident was not to Michael's advantage. Their discomfiture was visible. How could this strong young man allow himself to be struck like that and not demand satisfaction for such an insult? They contented themselves with bowing to him and retired.

A moment afterward the noise of wheels and the cracking of a whip showed that the Berlin, drawn by the tarantass horses, was driving rapidly away from the posthouse.

Nadia, unmoved, and Michael, still quivering, remained alone in the room.

The courier of the czar, his arms crossed over his chest, was seated motionless as a statue. However, a color which could not have been the blush of shame had replaced the paleness on his manly countenance.

Nadia did not doubt that powerful reasons alone could have allowed him to suffer so great a humiliation from such a man.

Then, going up to him as he had come to her in the police station at Niijn

CHAPTER VII.

NADIA, with the clear perception of a right mind, some secret motive directed all Michael Strogoff's actions; that he for a reason unknown to her did not belong to himself; that he had not the power of doing what he desired, and that in this instance especially he had been really sacrificed to duty even his resentment at the gross injury he had received.

Nadia, therefore, asked an explanation from Michael. Had not the hand which she had extended to him already replied to all that he might have been able to tell her?

Michael remained silent all the evening. The postmaster not being able to supply them with fresh horses until the next morning, a whole night must be passed at the house. Nadia could not do it to take some rest, and a room was therefore prepared for her.

The young girl would not doubt have preferred not to leave her companion, but she felt that he would rather be alone, and she made ready to go to her room.

Just as she was about to retire she could not refrain from going up to Michael to say good night.

"Brother," she whispered.

But he checked her with a gesture. The girl sighed and left the room.

Michael Strogoff did not sleep. He could not have slept even for an hour. The place on which he had been struck by the brutal traveler felt like a burn.

"For my country and the Father," he muttered as he ended his evening prayer.

He especially felt a great wish to know who was the man who had struck him, whence he came and where he was going. As to his face, the features of it were so deeply engraved on his memory that he had no fear of ever forgetting them.

Michael at last asked for the postmaster. The latter, a Siberian of the old type, came directly and, looking rather contemptuously at the young man, waited to be questioned.

"You belong to the country?" asked Michael.

"Yes."

"Do you know that man who took my horses?"

"No."

"Had you never seen him before?"

"Never."

"Who do you think he was?"

"A man who knows how to make himself obeyed."

Michael fixed his piercing gaze upon the Siberian, but the other did not quail before it.

"Do you dare to judge me?" exclaimed Michael.

"Yes," answered the Siberian, "for there are some things that even a plain merchant cannot receive without returning."

"Blows?"

"Blows, young man. I am of an age and strength to tell you."

Michael went up to the postmaster and laid his two powerful hands on his shoulders.

Then in a peculiarly calm tone he said:

"Be off, my friend; be off! I could kill you."

The postmaster understood this time. "I like him better for that," he muttered as he retired without adding another word.

At 8 o'clock the next morning, the 24th of July, three strong horses were harnessed to the tarantass. Michael and Nadia took their places, and Ichim, with its disagreeable remembrances, was soon left far behind.

The next day, July 25, at 8 o'clock in the morning, the tarantass arrived at the posthouse in Touloumank, having accomplished a distance of 120 versts since it had crossed the Ichim.

They rapidly changed horses. Here, however, for the first time the driver

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made difficulties about starting, declaring that detachments of Tartars were roving across the steppe and that travelers, horses and carriages would be a fine prize for such robbers.

Only by dint of a large bribe could Michael get over the unwillingness of the driver, for in this instance, as in many others, he did not wish to show his pistol.

The last ukase, having been transmitted by telegraph, was known in the Siberian provinces, and a Russian specially-exempted from obeying these orders would certainly have drawn public attention to himself, a thing above all to be avoided by the czar's courier.

As to the driver's hesitation, either theascal traded on the trader's impatience or he really had good reason to fear some misfortune.

However, at last the tarantass started and made such good way that by 3 in the afternoon it had reached Koulatsinskoe, eighty versts farther on. An hour after this it was on the banks of the Irtysh. Omsk was now only twenty versts distant.

The Irtysh is a large river and one of the principal of those which flow toward the north of Asia. Rising in the Altai mountains, it flows from the southeast to the northwest and empties itself into the Ob after a course of nearly 7,000 versts.

At this time of year, when all the rivers of the Siberian basin are much swollen, the waters of the Irtysh were very high. In consequence the current was changed to a regular torrent, rendering the passage difficult enough.

A swimmer could not have crossed, however powerful a one he might be, and even in a ferryboat there would be some danger.

But Michael and Nadia, determined to brave all perils whatever they might be, did not dream of shrinking from this one.

However, Michael proposed to his young companion that he should cross first, embarking in the ferryboat with the tarantass and horses, as he feared that the weight of this load would render it less safe.

After landing the carriage on the opposite bank he would return and fetch Nadia.

The girl refused. It would be the day of an hour, and she would not for her safety alone, be the cause of it.

The conversation was made not without difficulty, for the banks were partly wooded and the boat could not get in near enough.

However, after half an hour's exertion the boatmen got the tarantass and the three horses on board. Michael and Nadia and the driver embarked also, and they shoved off.

For a few minutes all went well. A little way up the river the current was broken by a long point projecting from the bank and forming an eddy easily navigated by the boat.

The two boatsmen propelled their barge with long poles, which they handled cleverly, but as they gained the middle of the stream it grew deeper and deeper until at last they could only just reach the bottom.

The ends of the poles were only a foot above the water, which rendered their use difficult and insufficient.

Michael and Nadia, seated in the stern of the boat and always in dread of a delay, watched the boatmen with some uneasiness.

"Look out!" cried one of them to his comrade.

The shout was occasioned by the new direction the boat was rapidly taking. It had got into the direct current and was being swept down the river.

By diligent use of the poles, putting the ends in a series of notches cut below the gunwale, the boatmen managed to keep their craft against the stream and slowly urged it in a slanting direction toward the right bank.

They calculated on reaching it some five or six versts below the landing place; but, after all, that would not matter so long as men and beasts could disembark without accident.

Michael, stimulated, moreover, by the prospect of double fare, did not doubt of succeeding in this difficult passage of the Irtysh.

But they reckoned without an incident which they were powerless to prevent, and neither their zeal nor their skillfulness could under the circumstances have done more.

The boat was in the middle of the current at nearly equal distances from either shore and being carried down at the rate of two versts an hour when Michael, springing to his feet, bent his gaze up the river.

Several boats, aided by oars as well as by the current, were coming swiftly down upon them.

Michael's brow contracted, and an exclamation escaped him.

"What is the matter?" asked the girl. But before Michael had time to reply one of the boatmen exclaimed in an accent of terror:

"The Tartars! The Tartars!"

They were indeed boats full of soldiers, and in a few minutes they must reach the ferryboat, it being too heavily laden to escape from them.

The terrified boatmen uttered exclamations of despair and dropped their poles.

"Courage, my friends!" cried Michael. "Courage! Fifty rubles for you if we reach the right bank before the boats overtake us!"

Incited by these words, the boatmen again worked manfully away, but it soon became evident that they could not escape the Tartars.

It was scarcely probable that they would pass without attacking them. On the contrary, there was everything to be feared from robbers such as these.

"Do not be afraid, Nadia," said Michael, "but be ready for anything."

"I am ready," replied Nadia.

"Even to throw yourself into the water when I tell you?"

"Whenever you tell me."

"Have confidence in me, Nadia."

"I have indeed."

To be Continued.

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