

THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

"And dared you alone, Nadia," said Michael, "attempt to cross the steppes of Siberia?"

"The Tartar invasion was not known when I left Riga," replied the young girl. "It was only at Moscow that I learned that news."

"And notwithstanding that you continued your journey?"

"It was my duty."

This word showed the character of the courageous girl.

She then spoke of her father, Wassili Fedor. He was a much esteemed physician at Riga, but his connection with some secret society having been ascertained by the police, he was obliged to leave his native city.

Wassili Fedor had not time to embrace his sick wife and his daughter, so soon to be left alone, when, shedding bitter tears, he was led away.

A year and a half after her husband's departure, Wassili Fedor died in the arms of her daughter, who was thus left alone and almost penniless.

Nadia Fedor then asked and easily obtained from the Russian government an authorization to join her father at Irkutsk.

She wrote and told him she was starting. She had barely enough money for this long journey, and yet she did not hesitate to undertake it. She would do what she could. God would do the rest.

The next day, the 19th of July, the Caucasus reached Perm, the last place at which she touched on the Kama.

The government of which Perm is the capital is one of the largest in the Russian empire and, extending over the Ural mountains, encroaches on Siberian territory.

Marble quarries, mines of salt, platinum, gold, and coal are worked here on a large scale.

Although Perm by its situation has become an important town, it is by no means attractive, being extremely muddy and dirty and possessing no resources.

This want of comfort is of no consequence to those going from Russia to Siberia, for they come from the more civilized districts and are supplied with all necessities, but to those arriving from the countries of central Asia, after a long and fatiguing journey, it would no doubt be more satisfactory if the first European town of the empire, situated on the Asiatic frontier, were better supplied with stores.

At Perm the travelers sell their vehicles, more or less damaged by the long journey across the plains of Siberia.

There, too, those passing from Europe to Asia purchase carriages during the summer and sleighs in the winter season before starting for a several months' journey through the steppes.

Michael Strogoff had already sketched out his programme, so now he had only to execute it.

A vehicle carrying the mail usually runs across the Ural mountains, but at the present time this, of course, was discontinued. Even if it had not been so, Michael Strogoff would not have taken it, as he wished to travel as fast as possible without depending on any one.

He wisely preferred to buy a carriage and journey by stages, stimulating the zeal of the postillions by tips.

Unfortunately, in consequence of the measures taken against foreigners of Asiatic origin, a large number of travelers had already left Perm, and therefore conveyances were extremely rare.

Michael was obliged to content himself with what had been rejected by others.

As to horses, as long as the czar's courier was not in Siberia he could exhibit his podorojnia without danger, and the postmen would give him the preference.

But once out of European Russia, he had to depend alone on the power of his horse.

But to what sort of vehicle should he harness his horses?

Michael Strogoff was lucky enough to discover a tarantass.

It is to be hoped that the invention of Russian coachbuilders will devise some improvement in this last named vehicle.

Spring is wanting in it, so it is very uncomfortable. In the absence of iron, wood is not spread, but its four wheels, with eight or nine feet between them, assure a certain equilibrium over the jolting, rough roads.

A splash board protects the travelers from the mud, and a strong leather hood, which may be pulled quite over the occupiers, shelters them from the great heat and violent storms of the summer.

It was not without careful search that Michael managed to discover this tarantass, and there was probably not a second to be found in all the town of Perm.

Notwithstanding that, he haggled long about the price, for form's sake, to set up to his part as Nicholas Korpanoff, a plain merchant of Irkutsk.

Nadia had followed her companion in this search after a suitable vehicle. Although the object of each was different, both were equally anxious to arrive and consequently to start.

One would have said the same will animated them both.

"Sister," said Michael, "I wish I could have found a more comfortable conveyance for you."

"Do you say that to me, brother, when I would have gone on foot, if need were, to rejoin my father?"

"I do not doubt your courage, Nadia,"

but there are physical fatigues which a woman may be unable to endure."

"I shall endure them, whatever they may be," replied the girl. "If you ever hear a complaint from my lips, you may leave me in the road and continue your journey alone."

Half an hour later on, the podorojnia being presented by Michael, three post horses were harnessed to the tarantass.

These animals, covered with long hair, were very like long legged bears. They were small, but spirited, being of Siberian breed.

They were harnessed thus: One, the largest, was secured between two long shafts on whose farther end was a hoop called a doug, carrying tassels and bells. The two others were simply fastened by ropes to the steps of the tarantass. This was the complete harness, with mere strings for reins.

Neither Michael Strogoff nor the young Livonian girl had any baggage. The rapidity with which one wished to make the journey and the more than modest resources of the other prevented them from embarrassing themselves with packages.

It was a fortunate thing under the circumstances, for the tarantass could not have carried both baggage and travelers. It was only made for two persons, without counting the driver, who kept his equilibrium on his narrow seat in a marvelous manner.

The driver is changed at every relay. The man who drove the tarantass during the first stage was, like his horses, a Siberian and no less shaggy than they—long hair, cut square on the forehead, hat with turned up rim, red belt, coat with crossed facings and buttons stamped with the imperial cipher. The driver on coming up with his team threw an inquisitive glance at the passengers of the tarantass. No luggage? And had there been, where in the world could he have stowed it? Rather shabby in appearance too. He looked contemptuous.

"Crows," said he, without caring whether he was overheard or not, "crows at 6 copecks a verst!"

"No; eagles," said Michael, who understood the slang perfectly; "eagles, do you hear, at 9 copecks a verst and a tip besides."

He was answered by a merry crack of the whip.

In the language of the Russian postillions the "crows" is the stingy or poor traveler who at the posthouses only pays 2 or 3 copecks a verst for the horses. The "eagle" is the traveler who does not mind expense, to say nothing of liberal tips. Therefore the crow could not claim to fly as rapidly as the imperial bird.

Nadia and Michael immediately took their places in the tarantass. A large box in case at any time they were delayed in reaching the posthouses, which are very comfortably provided under direction of the state. The hood was pulled up, as it was insupportably hot, and at 12 o'clock the tarantass, drawn by its three horses, left Perm in a cloud of dust.

CHAPTER VI.

IN the afternoon of the 23d of July Michael Strogoff and Nadia were not more than thirty versts from Irkutsk. Suddenly Michael caught sight of a carriage, scarcely visible among the clouds of dust, preceding them along the road.

As his horses were evidently less fatigued than those of the other traveler, he would not be long in overtaking it. This was neither a tarantass nor a telega, but a post berlin, all over dust and looking as if it had made a long journey. The postillion was thrashing his horses with all his might and only kept them at a gallop by dint of abuse and blows.

The berlin had certainly not passed through Novo-Sainsk and could only have struck the Irkutsk road by some less frequented route across the steppes.

Michael's first thought on seeing this berlin was to get in front of it and arrive first at the relay, so as to make sure of fresh horses. He said a word to his driver, who soon brought him up with the berlin.

As he passed a head was thrust out of the window of the berlin.

He had no time to see what it was like, but as he dashed by he distinctly heard this word uttered in an imperative tone:

"Stop!"

But he did not stop. On the contrary, the berlin was soon distanced by the tarantass.

It now became a regular race, for the horses of the berlin, no doubt excited by the sight and pace of the others, recovered their strength and kept up for some minutes. The two carriages were hidden in a cloud of dust. From this cloud issued the cracking of whips, mingled with excited shouts and exclamations of anger.

Nevertheless the advantage remained with Michael, which might be very important to him if the relay were poorly provided with horses. Two carriages were perhaps more than the postmaster could provide for, at least in a short space of time.

Half an hour after the berlin was left

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far behind, looking only a speck on the horizon on the steppe.

It was 8 o'clock in the evening when Michael and his companion arrived at the posthouse in Ichim.

The news was worse and worse with regard to the invasion.

Here had arrived just a short time before two men.

The one was English, the other French. Both were tall and thin, but the latter was sallow, as are the southern provincials, while the former was ruddy like a Lancashire gentleman.

The Anglo-Norman, formal, cold, grave, parsimonious of gestures and words, appearing only to speak or gesticulate under the influence of a spring operation at regular intervals. The Gaul, on the contrary, was lively with light eyes, and, all at once, having twenty different ways of explaining his thoughts, whereas his interlocutor seemed to have only one immutably stereotyped on his brain.

The strong contrast they presented would at once have struck the most superficial observer, but a physiognomist, regarding them more closely would have defined their particular characteristics by saying that the Frenchman was "all eyes," the Englishman was "all ears."

In fact, the visual apparatus of the one had been singularly perfected by practice. The sensibility of his retina must have been as instantaneous as that of those conjurers who recognize a card merely by a rapid movement in cutting the pack or by the arrangement only of marks invisible to others.

Frenchman, indeed, possessed in the highest degree what may be called "the memory of the eye."

The Englishman, on the contrary, appeared especially organized to listen and to hear. When his aural apparatus had been once struck by the sound of a voice, he could not forget it, and after ten or even twenty years he would have recognized it among a thousand. His ears, to be sure, had the power of moving as freely as those of animals who are provided with large auditory daps; but, since scientific men know that human ears possess, in fact, a very limited power of movement, we should not be far wrong in affirming that those of the said Englishman became erect and turned in all directions while endeavoring to gather in the sounds in a manner apparent only to the naturalist. It must be observed that this perfection of sight and hearing was of wonderful assistance to these two men in their vocation, for the Englishman acted as correspondent for The Daily Telegraph and the Frenchman as correspondent of the—of what newspaper or of what newspapers he did not say, and when asked he replied in a jocular manner that he corresponded with "his cousin Madeleine." This Frenchman, however, beneath his careless surface was wonderfully shrewd and sagacious. Even while speaking at random, perhaps the better to hide his desire to learn, he never forgot himself. His loquacity even helped him to conceal his thoughts, and he was perhaps even more discreet than his confrere of The Daily Telegraph.

It is needless to say that these two men were devoted to their mission in the world—that they delighted to throw themselves in the track of the most unexpected intelligence; that nothing terrified or discouraged them from succeeding; that they possessed the imperturbable sang froid and the genuine intrepidity of men of their calling. Enthusiastic jockeys in this steeplechase, this hunt after information, they leaped hedges, crossed rivers, sprang over fences with the ardor of pure blooded racers who will run "a good first" or die.

Their journals did not restrict them with regard to money, the surest, the most rapid, the most perfect element of information known to this day. It must also be added, to their honor, that neither the one nor the other evinced any of the qualities of the private life and that they only exercised their vocation when political or social interests were at stake. In a word, they made what has been for some years called "the great political and military reports."

It will be seen in following them that they had generally an independent mode of viewing events and, above all, their consequences, each having his own way of observing and appreciating. The object to be obtained being of adequate value, they never failed to expend the money required.

The French correspondent was named Alcide Jolivet, Harry Blount was the name of the Englishman. The dissimilarity of their characters, added to a certain amount of jealousy, which generally exists between rivals in the same calling, might have rendered them but little sympathetic. However, they did not avoid one another, but endeavored rather to exchange with each other the news of the day. They were two sportsmen, after all, hunting on the same grounds, in the same preserve. That which one missed might be advantageously secured by the other, and it was to their interest to meet and converse together.

From these two correspondents Michael learned that the town itself was menaced by the Tartar vanguard, and two days before the authorities had been obliged to retreat to Tobolsk.

There was not an officer nor a soldier left in Ichim.

On arrival at the relay Michael Strogoff immediately asked for horses.

He had been fortunate in distancing the berlin.

Only three horses were in a fit state to be immediately harnessed. The others had just come in worn out from a long stage.

The postmaster gave the order to put to.

As the two correspondents intended to stop at Ichim, they did not trouble themselves to find means of transport and therefore had their carriage put away.

In ten minutes Michael was told that his tarantass was ready to start.

"Good," said he.

Then, turning to the two reporters, he said:

"Well, gentlemen, since you remain at Ichim, I wish you success in the prosecution of your mission."

"What, Mr. Korpanoff?" said Alcide Jolivet, "do you not stop even for an hour at Ichim?"

"No, sir, and I also wish to leave the posthouse before the arrival of a berlin which I distanced."

"Are you afraid that the traveler will dispute the horses with you?"

"I particularly wish to avoid any difficulty."

To be Continued.

OBEYED THE JUDGE.

His Honor Was Respected Even if the Law Had Not Been.

Georgia has a stringent law forbidding its citizens to carry pistols on pain of forfeiting the weapons and paying a fine of \$50 or being imprisoned for thirty days.

Shortly after the passage of this enactment Judge Lester was holding court in a little town when suddenly he suspended the trial of a case by ordering the sheriff to lock the doors of the courthouse.

"Gentlemen," said the judge when the doors were closed, "I have just seen a pistol on a man in this room, and I cannot reconcile it to my sense of duty to let such a violation of the law pass unnoticed. I ought perhaps to go before the grand jury and indict him, but if that man will walk up to this stand and hand me his pistol and a fine of a dollar down here I will let him off this time."

The judge paused, and a lawyer sitting just before him got up, slipped his hand into a hip pocket, drew out a neat ivory handled six shooter and laid it, with a dollar, upon the stand.

"This is all right," said the judge, "but you are not the man I saw with the pistol."

Upon this another lawyer arose and laid down a Colt's revolver and a dollar bill before the judge, who repeated his former observation. The process went on until nineteen pistols of all kinds and sizes and shapes lay upon the stand, together with \$19 by their side. The judge laughed as he complimented the nineteen defendants upon being men of business, but added that the man whom he had seen with the pistol had not yet come up, and, glancing at the far side of the court, he commanded:

"I'll give him one minute to accept my proposition, and if he fails I will hand him over to the sheriff."

Immediately two men from the back of the court arose and began to move toward the judge's stand. Once they stopped to look at each other and then, coming slowly forward, laid down their pistols and their dollars. As they turned their backs the judge said:

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Feb. 5, 1901.

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