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THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

"I will traverse it."

"Above all, beware of the traitor Ivan Ogareff, who will perhaps meet thee on the way."

"I will beware of him."

"Wilt thou pass through Omsk?"

"Sire, that is my route."

"If thou dost see thy mother, there will be the risk of being recognized. Thou must not see her!"

Michael Strogoff hesitated a moment.

"I will not see her," said he.

"Swear to me that nothing will make thee acknowledge who thou art nor whither thou art going."

"I swear it."

"Michael Strogoff," continued the czar, giving the letter to the young courier.

"Take this letter. On it depends the safety of all Siberia and perhaps the life of my brother, the grand duke."

"This letter shall be delivered to his highness the grand duke."

"Thou wilt pass whatever happens?"

"I shall pass, or they shall kill me."

"I want thee to live."

"I shall live, and I shall pass," answered Michael Strogoff.

The czar appeared satisfied with Strogoff's calm and simple answer.

"Go, then, Michael Strogoff," said he, "go for God, for Russia, for my brother and for myself."

The courier, having saluted his sovereign, immediately left the imperial cabinet and in a few minutes the New Palace.

"You made a good choice there, general," said the czar.

"I think so, sire," replied General Kisloff, "and your majesty may be sure that Michael Strogoff will do all that a man can do."

"He is indeed a man," said the czar.

CHAPTER III.

THE distance between Moscow and Irkutsk, about to be traversed by Michael Strogoff, was 5,200 versts. Before the telegraph wires extended from the Ural mountains to the eastern frontier of Siberia the dispatch service was performed by couriers, those who traveled the most rapidly taking eighteen days to get from Moscow to Irkutsk.

In the first place, however, he must not travel as a courier of the czar usually would. No one must even suspect what he really was. Spies swarmed in a rebellious country. Let him be recognized, and his mission would be in danger. Also, while supplying him with a large sum of money, which was sufficient in some measure, General Kisloff had not given him any document specifying that he was in the emperor's service, which is the sesame par excellence.

He contented himself with furnishing him with a podorojna.

The podorojna was made out in the name of Nicholas Korpanoff, merchant, living at Irkutsk. It authorized Nicholas Korpanoff to be accompanied, if requisite, by one or more persons, and, moreover, it was by special notification made available in the event of the Muscovite government forbidding natives of any other countries to leave Russia.

The podorojna is simply a permission to take post horses, but Michael Strogoff was not to use it unless he was sure that by so doing he would not excite suspicion as to his mission—that is to say, while he was on European territory. The consequence was that in Siberia, while traversing the insurgent provinces, he would have no power over the relays either in the choice of horses in preference to others or in demanding conveyances for his personal use. Neither was Michael Strogoff to forget that he was no longer a courier, but a plain merchant, Nicholas Korpanoff, traveling from Moscow to Irkutsk, and as such exposed to all the impediments of an ordinary journey.

To pass unknown more or less rapidly, but to pass somehow or other—such were the directions he had received.

Thirty years previously the escort of a traveler of rank consisted of not less than 200 mounted Cossacks, 200 foot soldiers, 25 Baskir horsemen, 300 camels, 400 horses, 25 wagons, 2 portable boats and 2 pieces of cannon. All this was requisite for a journey in Siberia.

Michael Strogoff, however, had neither cannon nor horsemen nor foot soldiers nor beasts of burden. He would travel in a carriage or on horseback when he could, on foot when he could not.

There would be no difficulty in getting over the first 1,500 versts, the distance between Moscow and the Russian frontier. Railroads, post carriages, steamboats, relays of horses, were at every one's disposal and consequently at the disposal of the courier of the czar.

Accordingly on the morning of the 10th of July, having doffed his uniform, with a knapsack on his back, dressed in the simple Russian costume, tightly fitting tunic, the traditional belt of the moujik, wide trousers, gartered at the knees, and high boots, Michael Strogoff arrived at the station in time for the first train. He carried no arms, openly at least, but under his belt was hidden a revolver and in his pocket one of those large knives with which a Siberian hunter can so neatly disembowel a bear without injuring its pre-

cious fur.

A crowd of travelers collected at the Moscow station. The stations on the Russian railroads much used as places for meetings only by those who are about to be by the train, but by friends come to see them off. It indeed resembled a small news exchange.

The train in which Michael took his place was to set down at Nijni Novgorod. Terminated at that time the iron road, uniting Moscow and St. Peter, will eventually continue to the Russian frontier. It was a journey of about versts, and the train would accomplish it in ten hours.

Once arrived at Nijni Novgorod, Strogoff would, according to circumstances, either take the latest or the steamer on the Volga, to reach the Ural mountains as scotchless.

Michael Strogoff dismounted himself in his corner in worthy citizen whose affairs galled with him and who endeavored to time by sleep.

Nevertheless, a was not alone in his compartment, left with one eye open and listened both his ears.

In fact, the rumbling of the Kirghis borders of the Tatar invasion had transpired in some degree. The occupants of carriages, whom chance had made traveling companions, discussed the subject, though with that caution which becomes habitual among Russians, who know that spies are ever on watch for any treasonable expressions which may be uttered.

At the Wladimir station fresh travelers entered the train. Among others, a young girl pressed herself at the door of the car occupied by Michael Strogoff.

She was a young girl, tall and upright, as well as could be judged of her figure from the very simple and ample pelisse that covered her. Although she was still a very young girl in the literal sense of the term, the development of her high forehead and clearly cut features gave the idea that she was the possessor of a great moral energy, a point which did not escape Michael Strogoff. Evidently this young girl had already suffered in the past, and the future doubtless did not present itself to her in glowing colors. But it was none the less certain that she had known how to struggle and that she had resolved to struggle still with the trials of life. Her energy was evidently prompt and persistent and her calmness unshakable even under circumstances in which a man would be likely to give way or lose his self command.

Such was the impression which she produced at first sight. Michael Strogoff, being himself of an energetic temperament, was naturally struck by the character of her physiognomy, and, while taking care not to cause her annoyance by a too persistent gaze, he observed his neighbor with no small interest. The costume of the young traveler was both extremely simple and appropriate. She was not rich—that could easily be seen—but not the slightest mark of negligence was to be discerned in her dress. All her luggage was contained in a leather bag under lock and key, and which, for want of room, she held on her lap.

She wore a long, dark pelisse, which was gracefully adjusted at the neck by a blue tie. Under this pelisse a short skirt, also dark, fell over a robe which reached to her ankles and of which the lower edge was ornamented with some simple embroidery. Half boots of worked leather and thickly soled, as if chosen in the anticipation of a long journey, covered her small feet.

Michael Strogoff fancied that he recognized by certain details the fashion of the costume of Livonia, and he thought that his neighbor must be a native of the Baltic provinces.

But whether was this young girl going alone at an age when the fostering care of a father or the protection of a brother is considered a matter of necessity? Had she now come after an already long journey from the provinces of western Russia? Was she merely going to Nijni Novgorod, or was the end of her travels beyond the eastern frontier of the empire? Would some relation, some friend, await her arrival by the train, or was it not more probable, on the contrary, that she would find herself as much isolated in the town as she was in this compartment, where no one, she must think, appeared to care for her? It was probable.

Michael Strogoff observed her with interest, but, himself reserved, he sought no opportunity of accosting her, although several hours must elapse before the arrival of the train at Nijni Novgorod.

At last the train, at half past 8 in the evening, arrived at the station of Nijni Novgorod.

Before any one could get out of the carriages the inspectors of police presented themselves at the doors and examined the passengers.

Michael Strogoff showed his podorojna made out in the name of Nicholas Korpanoff. He had consequently no difficulty.

As to the other travelers in the compartment, all bound for Nijni Novgorod, their appearance, happily for them, was in nowise suspicious.

The young girl in her turn exhibited not a passport, since passports are no longer required in Russia, but a permit indorsed with a private seal and which seemed to be of a special character. The inspector read the permit with attention. Then, having attentively examined the person whose description it contained, he said:

"You are from Riga?"

"Yes," replied the young girl.

"You are going to Irkutsk?"

"Yes."

"By what route?"

"By Perm."

"Good!" replied the inspector. "Take care to have your permit visé at the police station of Nijni Novgorod." The young girl bent her head in token of assent.

To be continued.

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