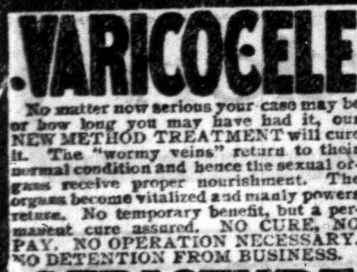




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THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

Near him some guards had brought a tripod on which was placed an iron dish, where some red-hot coals were burning without emitting any smoke. The light of the incineration of a resinous and aromatic substance, a mixture of frankincense and benzoin, which had been thrown on their surface.

Meanwhile another group of dancers had succeeded the first, but of a race very different, which Michael Strogoff at once recognized.

And we must believe that the two journalists also recognized them, for Harry Blount said to his confrere:

"These are the Zingari of Nijal Novgorod."

"The very ones!" cried Alcide Jolivet. "I imagine their eyes bring more money to these spies than their legs!"

And in making them out to be agents in the service of the emir Alcide Jolivet, it is well known, did not deceive himself.

In the first rank of the gypsies figured Sangarre, in her superb costume, strange and picturesque as it was, which set off still more her beauty. Sangarre did not dance, but stood in the middle of her dancing girls, whose fantastic steps partook of all the countries which their race had traversed in Europe, of Bohemia, of Egypt, of Italy and of Spain. They became animated at the noise of the cymbals which clanged on their arms and at the swelling of the "daires," a kind of drum sounded by the fingers.

Sangarre, holding one of these daires, which trembled between her hands, excited this troop of veritable corymbes.

Then came forward a youthful gypsy, some fifteen years old at most. He held in his hand a dourate, the two cords of which he made to vibrate by a simple gilding of the nails. He sang.

During the couplet of his song of fantastic rhythm a danseuse came and placed herself near him and remained immovable, listening to him, but each time the burden came to the lips of the young singer she again took up her interrupted dance, shaking her dourate near him and deafening him with the sound of her drum.

Then, after the last verse, the dancers unlaced the gypsy in a thousand turnings of their dances.

At this moment a shower of gold fell from the hands of the emir and his allies, from the hands of the officers of all grades, and to the noise of the pieces which struck the cymbals of the dancers were blended the last murmurs of the dourates and tambourines.

"Prodigious as freebooters!" said Alcide Jolivet in the ear of his companion.

And, indeed, it was stolen money which fell in showers, for with the Tartar tomans and sequins raised also Muscovite ducats and rubles.

Then silence was made for an instant, and the voice of the executioner, placing his hand on the shoulder of Michael Strogoff, again spoke those words whose repetition rendered them still more sinister:

"Look with all your eyes! Look!"

But this time Alcide Jolivet observed that the executioner did not hold his naked sword in his hand.

Then suddenly, as if at a given signal, all the fires of the fantasia were extinguished, the dances ceased, the dancers disappeared. The ceremony was terminated, and the torches alone lit up the plateau which some instants before was so full of lights.

At a sign from the emir Michael Strogoff was led into the middle of the square.

Little desirous of assisting at the torture reserved for this unfortunate man, Harry Blount and Alcide Jolivet then re-entered the city.

An hour later they were hastening along the road to Irkutsk, and it was among the Russians they would attempt to follow what Alcide Jolivet called by anticipation "the campaign of revenge."

The emir made a gesture. Michael Strogoff, pushed by the guards, approached the terrace, and then in that Tartar language which he understood Feofar said to him:

"Russian spy, you are come to see. You have seen for the last time. In an instant thine eyes shall be forever shut to the light!"

It was not with death, but with blindness that Michael Strogoff was about to be stricken. Loss of sight, more terrible perhaps than loss of life! The unhappy man was condemned to lose his eyesight.

Nevertheless on hearing the penalty pronounced by the emir Michael Strogoff did not become weak. He remained impassible, his large eyes open, as if he were wishing to concentrate all his life in this one last look.

To ask for pity from these fierce men was useless and, besides, unworthy of him. He did not even think of it. All his thought was concentrated on his mission that had irrevocably failed, on his mother, on Nadia, whom he should never see again! But he did not allow to be seen any of the emotion which he felt.

Besides, the feeling of vengeance, to be accomplished at some future time, carried away his whole being.

"Ivan," said he, with a menacing voice, "Ivan, the traitor, the last threat of my eyes shall be for thee."

Ivan Ogareff shrugged his shoulders. But Michael Strogoff deceived himself. It was not in looking at Ivan Ogareff that his eyes were to be fixed never more to open.

Marfa Strogoff came and stood before him.

"My mother!" cried he. "Yes, yes, on thee must be turned my last look and not on this miserable man! Remain there before me, that I may still see thy beloved figure; that my eyes may close while looking at thee!"

The old Siberian, without uttering a word, came forward.

"Drive away this woman!" said Ivan Ogareff.

Two soldiers pushed back Marfa Strogoff. She drew back, but remained standing some paces distant from her son.

The executioner appeared. This time he held his naked sword in his hand. That sword, heated to a white heat, he had just drawn from the iron pan where the perfumed coals were burning.

Michael Strogoff was about to be made blind according to the Tartar custom, with a heated blade passed over his eyes!

Michael Strogoff did not seek to resist. Nothing else existed in his eyes than his mother, whom he devoured then with his look. All his life was in this last vision.

Marfa Strogoff, with her eyes wide open and her arms stretched toward him, was looking at him.

The white heated blade passed over the eyes of Michael Strogoff.

A loud cry of despair was heard. Old Marfa fell lifeless to the earth! Michael Strogoff was blind.

His orders having been executed, the emir retired, with all his household. Soon the only remained on the plateau Ivan Ogareff and the torchbearers.

Did the miserable wretch wish to insult him still more and after the executioner give him the last blow?

Ivan Ogareff slowly approached Michael Strogoff, who heard him coming and at once straightened himself.

Ivan Ogareff drew from his pocket the emperor's letter. He opened it and as the last insult placed it before the eyes of the courier of the czar, before those eyes whose light had been brutally extinguished forever, saying at the same time:

"Read now, Michael Strogoff; read and go and repeat at Irkutsk what you shall have read. The true courier of the czar is myself!"

Having said this, the traitor placed the letter in his breast. Then, without turning round, he left the place, and the torchbearers followed him.

Michael Strogoff remained alone, some paces from his mother, who was lifeless, perhaps dead.

One heard at a distance the cries, the songs, all the noise of the orgies. Tomak was illuminated and was bright as a city during a great feast.

Michael Strogoff listened. The scene of the late revels and crime was silent and deserted.

He dragged himself by groping toward the place where his mother had fallen. He found her with his hand. He bent down toward her. He brought his figure near to hers. He listened to the beatings of her heart. Then one would have said that he spoke to her in a low voice.

Did old Marfa still live and did she hear the words her son spoke to her? In any case she did not make any sign of life by movement.

Michael Strogoff kissed her forehead and her white hairs. Then he rose, and, groping with his foot and trying to hold his hands in such a way as to guide him, he walked by little and little to the end of the plateau.

Suddenly Nadia appeared. She went straight to her companion. A dagger that she held served to cut the cords that bound the arms of Michael Strogoff.

He, blind as he was, did not know who it was who was releasing him, for Nadia had not spoken a word.

But, that done, said she: "Brother?"

"Nadia," murmured Michael Strogoff.

"Come, brother," replied Nadia. "Henceforth my eyes shall be your eyes, and it is I who will conduct you to Irkutsk!"

In half an hour after Michael Strogoff and Nadia had left Tomak.

A certain number of the prisoners on that night were able to escape from the Tartars, for officers and soldiers, all more or less besotted, had unconsciously relaxed the severe surveillance which they had maintained up to that time, both at the camp of Zabeiro and during the march of the convoy.

Nadia, after having been led out with the other prisoners, had been able to escape and return to the plateau at the very moment Michael Strogoff was being conducted before the emir.

To be Continued.

The man who can be nothing but serious or nothing but merry is but half a man.

A brave man is sometimes a desperado; but a bully is always a coward—Hulburton.



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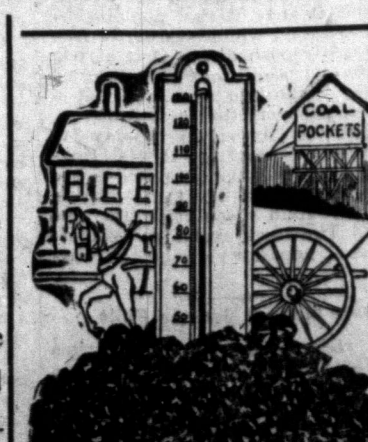
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