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# THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

"I have admired him without understanding him," answered the young girl. "I have never felt him to be more worthy of respect than he is at the present moment."

The old woman was silent for a moment.

"Was he tall?" she asked.

"Very tall."

"And very handsome—is it not so? Come, tell me, my girl."

"He was very handsome," answered Nadia, blushing deeply.

"It was my son! I tell you it was my son!" exclaimed the old woman, embracing Nadia.

"Your son?" said Nadia, amazed.

"Your son?"

"Come," said Marfa, "let us get to the bottom of this, my child. Your companion, your friend, your protector, had a mother. Did he never speak to you of his mother?"

"Of his mother?" said Nadia. "He spoke to me of his mother—as I spoke to him of my father—often, always. He adored her."

"Nadia, Nadia, you have just told me about my son," said the old woman.

And she added impetuously:

"Was he not going to see his mother, whom you say he loved, on his way through Omsk?"

"No," answered Nadia; "no, he was not."

"Not?" cried Marfa. "You dare to tell me not?"

"I have said it, but it remains for me to inform you that from motives unknown to me and which had to guide him before every other consideration I was given to understand that Nicholas Korpanoff had to traverse the country in the most absolute secrecy. It was for him a question of life and of death and, more sacred still, a question of duty and honor."

"Of duty in reality, of imperious duty," said the old Siberian, "of that kind for which a person sacrifices everything, for the accomplishment of which he would deny himself, everything, even the joy of coming to give a kiss, the last perhaps, to his old mother. All that you do not know, Nadia, all that I did not know myself at this moment I know. You have made me understand all. But the light which you have thrown into the deepest darkness of my heart, that light, alas, I may not cause to enter your own. The secret of my son, Nadia, since he has not told it to you, I must keep for him. Forgive me, Nadia. The good deed you have done me I cannot return to you."

"Mother, I ask nothing from you," answered Nadia.

All was thus explained to the old Siberian, all, even the inexplicable conduct of her son with regard to herself in the inn at Omsk in presence of the witnesses of their meeting. There was no doubt that the young girl's companion was Michael Strogoff and that a secret mission, some important dispatch to be carried across the invaded country, obliged him to conceal his quality of the czar's courier.

"Ah, my brave boy!" thought Marfa. "No, I was not betraying you, and tortures shall not wrest from me the avowal that it was you whom I saw at Omsk."

Marfa could with a word have paid Nadia for all her devotion to her. She could have told her that her companion, Nicholas Korpanoff, or rather, Michael Strogoff, had not perished in the waters of the Irish, since it was some days after that incident that she had met him, that she had spoken to him. But she restrained herself, she was silent and contented herself with saying:

"Hope, my child. Misfortune will not overcome you. You will see your father again, I feel it. And perhaps he who gave you the name of sister is not dead. God cannot have allowed your brave companion to perish. Hope, my child, hope. Do as I do. The mourning which I wear is not yet for my son."

Such was now the situation of Marfa Strogoff and Nadia toward each other. The old Siberian had understood all, and the young girl was ignorant of the fact that her companion so much respected still lived she knew at least the relationship which he held toward her whom she had made her mother, and she thanked God for having given her that joy and pleasure thus to be able to replace at the side of the prisoner that son whom she had lost.

But that which neither the one nor the other could know was that Michael Strogoff, taken at Kalvan, was one of the same convoy and was bound like themselves for Tomsk.

At length, on the 15th of August, toward evening, the convoy reached the little town of Zabeldeiro, some thirty versts from Tomsk. At this place the route again lay along the course of the Tom.

All this night the prisoners were to camp on the banks of the Tom. The emir, in fact, had deferred until the next day the entry of his troops into Tomsk. It had been decided that a military display should mark the inauguration of the Tartar headquarters in this important city. Fear-Khan already occupied the fortress, but the body of his army was packed under the walls, waiting for the moment to make a solemn entry.

Ivan Ogareff had left the emir at Tomsk, where they had both arrived

the evening before, and he returned to the encampment at Zabeldeiro. Next day he had to start from this place with the rear guard of the Tartar army. A house had been placed at his disposal where he could stay the night. At sunrise, under his command, horse and foot set out for Tomsk, where the emir wished to receive them with all the pomp and display of an Asiatic sovereign.

When the orders for a halt had been given, the prisoners, worn out with a three-days' journey, a prey to the most burning thirst, content at length quench their thirst and take some repose.

The sun had already set, but the horizon was still lighted up by the twilight, when Nadia, supporting Marfa Strogoff, reached the banks of the Tom. The two had not been able so far to penetrate the ranks of those who thronged the high bank, and they came to drink in their turn.

The old Siberian bent over the fresh stream, and Nadia, having plunged her hands into it, carried it to the lips of Marfa. Then she refreshed herself in her turn. The cold water of the pure stream seemed to give back life to the old woman and the young girl. Suddenly Nadia, as she left the banks, straightened herself. An involuntary cry escaped her lips.

Michael Strogoff was there and only some paces from her! It was he!

At the cry of Nadia Michael Strogoff had started, but he had sufficient command of himself not to utter a word which could compromise him.

And yet at the very moment that Nadia had recognized him he had recognized his mother. Michael Strogoff at this unexpected meeting, not feeling himself to be any longer master of himself, raised his hand to his eyes and immediately left the spot. Nadia was instinctively hastening forward to rejoice him when the old Siberian whispered these words in her ear:

"Stay, my daughter!"

"It is he!" answered Nadia in a voice trembling with emotion. "He lives, mother! It is he!"

"It is my son," answered Marfa Strogoff; "it is Michael Strogoff, and you see that I do not take one step toward him. Follow my example."

Michael Strogoff had just experienced one of the most violent emotions which it is ever given to man to feel. His mother and Nadia were there. Those two prisoners, each of whom seemed to hold the first place in his heart, were there joined with him in one common misfortune. Did Nadia know who he was? No, for he had seen the gesture of Marfa Strogoff, and he had seen at the moment she was about to rush upon him. Marfa Strogoff had understood all and kept her secret.

Michael Strogoff could then hope that this fresh and unexpected meeting at the camp of Zabeldeiro would have no injurious consequences neither for his mother nor for himself, but he did not know that certain particulars of that scene, rapidly as it had passed, had been gained by Sangarre, the spy of Ivan Ogareff.

The gypsy was there, a few paces from the bank, watching as ever the old Siberian, without her suspecting it. She had not been able to perceive Michael Strogoff, who had already disappeared when Sangarre turned round, but the gesture of the mother, withholding Nadia, had not escaped her, and a light from Marfa's eyes told her everything.

There was no longer any doubt that the son of Marfa Strogoff, the courier of the czar, was now at Zabeldeiro among the prisoners of Ivan Ogareff.

Sangarre did not know him, but she knew he was there. She did not then attempt to discover him, a thing which would have been impossible in the midst of this dangerous crowd.

As for again spying after Nadia and Marfa Strogoff, this was equally useless. It was evident that these two women would be on their guard, and it would be impossible to seize by surprise anything of a nature to compromise the courier of the czar.

The gypsy had then only one thought, to warn Ivan Ogareff. Wherefore she immediately left the camp.

A quarter of an hour afterward she arrived at Zabeldeiro and was shown into the house occupied by the lieutenant of the emir.

Ivan Ogareff immediately received the gypsy.

"What do you wish, Sangarre?" he asked.

"The son of Marfa Strogoff is at the camp," answered Sangarre.

"A prisoner?"

"Ah," cried Ivan Ogareff, "I knew!"

"You knew nothing, Ivan," said the gypsy, "for you do not even know him."

"But do you know him? You have seen him, Sangarre?"

"I have not seen him, but I saw his mother betray herself by a movement which has told me everything."

"Do you not deceive yourself?"

"I do not."

To be Continued.

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