

**Michael Strogoff**

**by**

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## 1. A Fete At The New Palace

"SIRE, a fresh dispatch."

"Whence?"

"From Tomsk?"

"Is the wire cut beyond that city?"

"Yes, sire, since yesterday."

"Telegraph hourly to Tomsk, General, and keep me informed of all that occurs."

"Sire, it shall be done," answered General Kissoff.

These words were exchanged about two hours after midnight, at the moment when the fete given at the New Palace was at the height of its splendor.

During the whole evening the bands of the Preobra-jensky and Paulowsky regiments had played without cessation polkas, mazurkas, schottisches, and waltzes from among the choicest of their repertoires. Innumerable couples of dancers whirled through the magnificent saloons of the palace, which stood at a few paces only from the "old house of stones"--in former days the scene of so many terrible dramas, the echoes of whose walls were this night awakened by the gay strains of the musicians.

The grand-chamberlain of the court, was, besides, well seconded in his arduous and delicate duties. The grand-dukes and their aides-de-camp, the chamberlains-in-waiting and other officers of the palace, presided personally in the arrangement of the dances. The grand duchesses, covered with diamonds, the ladies-in-waiting in their most exquisite costumes, set the example to the wives of the military and civil dignitaries of the ancient "city of white stone." When, therefore, the signal for the "polonaise" resounded through the saloons, and the guests of all ranks took part in that measured promenade, which on occasions of this kind has all the importance of a national dance, the mingled costumes, the sweeping robes adorned with lace, and uniforms covered with orders, presented a scene of dazzling splendor, lighted by hundreds of lustres multiplied tenfold by the numerous mirrors adorning the walls.

The grand saloon, the finest of all those contained in the New Palace, formed to this procession of exalted personages and splendidly dressed women a frame worthy of the magnificence they displayed. The rich ceiling, with its gilding already softened by the touch of time, appeared as if glittering with stars. The embroidered drapery of the curtains and doors, falling in gorgeous folds, assumed rich and varied hues, broken by the shadows of the heavy masses of damask.

Through the panes of the vast semicircular bay-windows the light, with which the saloons were filled, shone forth with the brilliancy of a conflagration, vividly illuminating the gloom in which for some hours the palace had been shrouded. The attention of those of the guests not taking part in the dancing was attracted by the contrast. Resting in the recesses of the windows, they could discern, standing out dimly in the darkness, the vague outlines of the countless towers,

domes, and spires which adorn the ancient city. Below the sculptured balconies were visible numerous sentries, pacing silently up and down, their rifles carried horizontally on the shoulder, and the spikes of their helmets glittering like flames in the glare of light issuing from the palace. The steps also of the patrols could be heard beating time on the stones beneath with even more regularity than the feet of the dancers on the floor of the saloon. From time to time the watchword was repeated from post to post, and occasionally the notes of a trumpet, mingling with the strains of the orchestra, penetrated into their midst. Still farther down, in front of the facade, dark masses obscured the rays of light which proceeded from the windows of the New Palace. These were boats descending the course of a river, whose waters, faintly illumined by a few lamps, washed the lower portion of the terraces.

The principal personage who has been mentioned, the giver of the fete, and to whom General Kissoff had been speaking in that tone of respect with which sovereigns alone are usually addressed, wore the simple uniform of an officer of chasseurs of the guard. This was not affectation on his part, but the custom of a man who cared little for dress, his contrasting strongly with the gorgeous costumes amid which he moved, encircled by his escort of Georgians, Cossacks, and Circassians--a brilliant band, splendidly clad in the glittering uniforms of the Caucasus.

This personage, of lofty stature, affable demeanor, and physiognomy calm, though bearing traces of anxiety, moved from group to group, seldom speaking, and appearing to pay but little attention either to the merriment of the younger guests or the graver remarks of the exalted dignitaries or members of the diplomatic corps who represented at the Russian court the principal governments of Europe. Two or three of these astute politicians--physiognomists by virtue of their profession-- failed not to detect on the countenance of their host symptoms of disquietude, the source of which eluded their penetration; but none ventured to interrogate him on the subject.

It was evidently the intention of the officer of chasseurs that his own anxieties should in no way cast a shade over the festivities; and, as he was a personage whom almost the population of a world in itself was wont to obey, the gayety of the ball was not for a moment checked.

Nevertheless, General Kissoff waited until the officer to whom he had just communicated the dispatch forwarded from Tomsk should give him permission to withdraw; but the latter still remained silent. He had taken the telegram, he had read it carefully, and his visage became even more clouded than before. Involuntarily he sought the hilt of his sword, and then passed his hand for an instant before his eyes, as though, dazzled by the brilliancy of the light, he wished to shade them, the better to see into the recesses of his own mind.

"We are, then," he continued, after having drawn General Kissoff aside towards a window, "since yesterday without intelligence from the Grand Duke?"

"Without any, sire; and it is to be feared that in a short time dispatches will no longer cross the Siberian frontier."

"But have not the troops of the provinces of Amoor and Irkutsk, as those also of the Trans-Balkan territory, received orders to march immediately upon Irkutsk?"

"The orders were transmitted by the last telegram we were able to send beyond Lake Baikal."

"And the governments of Yeniseisk, Omsk, Semipolatinsk, and Tobolsk--are we still in direct communication with them as before the insurrection?"

"Yes, sire; our dispatches have reached them, and we are assured at the present moment that the Tartars have not advanced beyond the Irtysh and the Obi."

"And the traitor Ivan Ogareff, are there no tidings of him?"

"None," replied General Kissoff. "The head of the police cannot state whether or not he has crossed the frontier."

"Let a description of him be immediately dispatched to Nijni-Novgorod, Perm, Ekaterenburg, Kasirnov, Tioumen, Ishim, Omsk, Tomsk, and to all the telegraphic stations with which communication is yet open."

"Your majesty's orders shall be instantly carried out."

"You will observe the strictest silence as to this."

The General, having made a sign of respectful assent, bowing low, mingled with the crowd, and finally left the apartments without his departure being remarked.

The officer remained absorbed in thought for a few moments, when, recovering himself, he went among the various groups in the saloon, his countenance reassuming that calm aspect which had for an instant been disturbed.

Nevertheless, the important occurrence which had occasioned these rapidly exchanged words was not so unknown as the officer of the chasseurs of the guard and General Kissoff had possibly supposed. It was not spoken of officially, it is true, nor even officiously, since tongues were not free; but a few exalted personages had been informed, more or less exactly, of the events which had taken place beyond the frontier. At any rate, that which was only slightly known, that which was not matter of conversation even between members of the corps diplomatique, two guests, distinguished by no uniform, no decoration, at this reception in the New Palace, discussed in a low voice, and with apparently very correct information.

By what means, by the exercise of what acuteness had these two ordinary mortals ascertained that which so many persons of the highest rank and importance scarcely even suspected? It is impossible to say. Had they the gifts of foreknowledge and foresight? Did they possess a supplementary sense, which enabled them to see beyond that limited horizon which bounds all human gaze? Had they obtained a peculiar power of divining the most secret events? Was it owing to the habit, now become a second nature, of living on information, that their mental constitution had thus become really transformed? It was difficult to escape from this conclusion.

Of these two men, the one was English, the other French; both were tall and thin, but the latter was sallow as are the southern Provençals, while the former was ruddy like a Lancashire gentleman. The Anglo-Norman, formal, cold, grave, parsimonious of gestures and words, appeared only to speak or gesticulate under the influence of a spring operating at regular intervals. The Gaul, on the contrary, lively and petulant, expressed himself with lips, eyes, hands, 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 closely, would have defined their particular characteristics by saying, that if 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 its retina must have been as instantaneous as that of those conjurors who recognize a card merely by a rapid movement in cutting the pack or by the arrangement only of marks invisible to others. The 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 not the power of moving as freely as those of animals who are provided with large auditory flaps; 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 of the Daily Telegraph, and the Frenchman, as correspondent 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, neath 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. Both were present at this fete given at the New Palace on the night of the 15th of July in their character of reporters.

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 ever looked over or listened at the walls of 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 French correspondent was named Alcide Jolivet. Harry Blount was the name of the Englishman. They had just met for the first time at this fete in the New Palace, of which they had been ordered to give an account in their papers. 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 each other, but endeavored rather to exchange with each other the chat of the day. They were sportsmen, after all, hunting on the same ground. That which one missed might be advantageously secured by the other, and it was to their interest to meet and converse.

This evening they were both on the look out; they felt, in fact, that there was something in the air.

"Even should it be only a wildgoose chase," said Alcide Jolivet to himself, "it may be worth powder and shot."

The two correspondents therefore began by cautiously sounding each other.

"Really, my dear sir, this little fete is charming!" said Alcide Jolivet pleasantly, thinking himself obliged to begin the conversation with this eminently French phrase.

"I have telegraphed already, 'splendid!'" replied Harry Blount calmly, employing the word specially devoted to expressing admiration by all subjects of the United Kingdom.

"Nevertheless," added Alcide Jolivet, "I felt compelled to remark to my cousin--"

"Your cousin?" repeated Harry Blount in a tone of surprise, interrupting his brother of the pen.

"Yes," returned Alcide Jolivet, "my cousin Madeleine. It is with her that I correspond, and she likes to be quickly and well informed, does my cousin. I therefore remarked to her that, during this fete, a sort of cloud had appeared to overshadow the sovereign's brow."

"To me, it seemed radiant," replied Harry Blount, who perhaps, wished to conceal his real opinion on this topic.

"And, naturally, you made it 'radiant,' in the columns of the Daily Telegraph."

"Exactly."

"Do you remember, Mr. Blount, what occurred at Zakret in 1812?"

"I remember it as well as if I had been there, sir," replied the English correspondent.

"Then," continued Alcide Jolivet, "you know that, in the middle of a fete given in his honor, it was announced to the Emperor Alexander that Napoleon had just crossed the Niemen with the vanguard of the French army. Nevertheless the Emperor did not leave the fete, and notwithstanding the extreme gravity of intelligence which might cost him his empire, he did not allow himself to show more uneasiness."

"Than our host exhibited when General Kissoff informed him that the telegraphic wires had just been cut between the frontier and the government of Irkutsk."

"Ah! you are aware of that?"

"I am!"

"As regards myself, it would be difficult to avoid knowing it, since my last telegram reached Udinsk," observed Alcide Jolivet, with some satisfaction.

"And mine only as far as Krasnoiarsk," answered Harry Blount, in a no less satisfied tone.

"Then you know also that orders have been sent to the troops of Nikolaevsk?"

"I do, sir; and at the same time a telegram was sent to the Cossacks of the government of Tobolsk to concentrate their forces."

"Nothing can be more true, Mr. Blount; I was equally well acquainted with these measures, and you may be sure that my dear cousin shall know of them tomorrow."

"Exactly as the readers of the Daily Telegraph shall know it also, M. Jolivet."

"Well, when one sees all that is going on. . . ."

"And when one hears all that is said. . . ."

"An interesting campaign to follow, Mr. Blount."

"I shall follow it, M. Jolivet!"

"Then it is possible that we shall find ourselves on ground less safe, perhaps, than the floor of this ball-room."

"Less safe, certainly, but--"

"But much less slippery," added Alcide Jolivet, holding up his companion, just as the latter, drawing back, was about to lose his equilibrium.

Thereupon the two correspondents separated, pleased that the one had not stolen a march on the other.

At that moment the doors of the rooms adjoining the great reception saloon were thrown open, disclosing to view several immense tables beautifully laid out, and groaning under a profusion of valuable china and gold plate. On the central table, reserved for the princes, princesses, and members of the corps diplomatique, glittered an epergne of inestimable price, brought from London, and around this chef-d'oeuvre of chased gold reflected under the light of the lusters a thousand pieces of most beautiful service from the manufactories of Sevres.

The guests of the New Palace immediately began to stream towards the supper-rooms.

At that moment. General Kissoff, who had just re-entered, quickly approached the officer of chasseurs.

"Well?" asked the latter abruptly, as he had done the former time.

"Telegrams pass Tomsk no longer, sire."

"A courier this moment!"

The officer left the hall and entered a large antechamber adjoining. It was a cabinet with plain oak furniture, situated in an angle of the New Palace. Several pictures, amongst others some by Horace Vernet, hung on the wall.

The officer hastily opened a window, as if he felt the want of air, and stepped out on a balcony to breathe the pure atmosphere of a lovely July night. Beneath his eyes, bathed in moonlight, lay a fortified inclosure, from which rose two cathedrals, three palaces, and an arsenal. Around this inclosure could be seen three distinct towns: Kitai-Gorod, Beloi-Gorod, Zemlianai-Gorod--European, Tartar, and Chinese quarters of great extent, commanded by towers, belfries, minarets, and the cupolas of three hundred churches, with green domes,

surmounted by the silver cross. A little winding river, here and there reflected the rays of the moon.

This river was the Moskowa; the town Moscow; the fortified inclosure the Kremlin; and the officer of chasseurs of the guard, who, with folded arms and thoughtful brow, was listening dreamily to the sounds floating from the New Palace over the old Muscovite city, was the Czar.

## 2. Russians And Tartars

THE Czar had not so suddenly left the ball-room of the New Palace, when the fete he was giving to the civil and military authorities and principal people of Moscow was at the height of its brilliancy, without ample cause; for he had just received information that serious events were taking place beyond the frontiers of the Ural. It had become evident that a formidable rebellion threatened to wrest the Siberian provinces from the Russian crown.

Asiatic Russia, or Siberia, covers a superficial area of 1,790,208 square miles, and contains nearly two millions of inhabitants. Extending from the Ural Mountains, which separate it from Russia in Europe, to the shores of the Pacific Ocean, it is bounded on the south by Turkestan and the Chinese Empire; on the north by the Arctic Ocean, from the Sea of Kara to Behring's Straits. It is divided into several governments or provinces, those of Tobolsk, Yeniseisk, Irkutsk, Omsk, and Yakutsk; contains two districts, Okhotsk and Kamtschatka; and possesses two countries, now under the Muscovite dominion-- that of the Kirghiz and that of the Tshouktshes. This immense extent of steppes, which includes more than one hundred and ten degrees from west to east, is a land to which criminals and political offenders are banished.

Two governor-generals represent the supreme authority of the Czar over this vast country. The higher one resides at Irkutsk, the far capital of Eastern Siberia. The River Tchouna separates the two Siberias.

No rail yet furrows these wide plains, some of which are in reality extremely fertile. No iron ways lead from those precious mines which make the Siberian soil far richer below than above its surface. The traveler journeys in summer in a kibick or telga; in winter, in a sledge.

An electric telegraph, with a single wire more than eight thousand versts in length, alone affords communication between the western and eastern frontiers of Siberia. On issuing from the Ural, it passes through Ekaterenburg, Kasirnov, Tioumen, Ishim, Omsk, Elamsk, Kolyvan, Tomsk, Krasnoiarsk, Nijni-Udinsk, Irkutsk, Verkne-Nertschink, Strelink, Albazine, Blagowstenks, Radde, Orlomskaya, Alexandrowskoe, and Nikolaevsk; and six roubles and nineteen copecks are paid for every word sent from one end to the other. From Irkutsk there is a branch to Kiatka, on the Mongolian frontier; and from thence, for thirty copecks a word, the post conveys the dispatches to Pekin in a fortnight.

It was this wire, extending from Ekaterenburg to Nikolaevsk, which had been cut, first beyond Tomsk, and then between Tomsk and Kolyvan.

This was why the Czar, to the communication made to him for the second time by General Kissoff, had answered by the words, "A courier this moment!"

The Czar remained motionless at the window for a few moments, when the door was again opened. The chief of police appeared on the threshold.

"Enter, General," said the Czar briefly, "and tell me all you know of Ivan Ogareff."

"He is an extremely dangerous man, sire," replied the chief of police.

"He ranked as colonel, did he not?"

"Yes, sire."

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