JULES VERNE'S MIKHAIL STROGOFF
translated by Stephanie Smee

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PART ONE

I

A BALL AT THE NEW PALACE

‘Sire, fresh news just in!’

‘From?’

‘From Tomsk.’

‘And beyond that town the line is cut?’

‘It has been since yesterday.’

‘Have a telegram sent to Tomsk on the hour, every hour, and keep me informed, General.’

‘Yes, Sire,’ replied General Kissoff.

The exchange took place at two o’clock in the morning, just as the ball at the New Palace was at the height of its glory.

The Preobrajensky and Paulovsky regimental orchestras had carefully selected from their dance repertoire the best of their polkas, mazurkas, schottisches and waltzes and had played non-stop. Dancing couples multiplied into the distance across the magnificent reception rooms of the palace, built just a few steps from that ‘old house of stones’, scene in the past to so many terrible tragedies, echoes of which had returned that night to beat time with the quadrilles.

The Grand Marshal of the court found himself well assisted in his rather sensitive duties. Grand dukes and their aides-de-camp, chamberlains and palace officials all presided over the order of the dances. Diamond-bedecked grand duchesses in their finest ball gowns, surrounded by their ladies-in-waiting, valiantly set the tone for the wives of senior civil and military officials from the old ‘white-stone’ city. So, when the *polonaise* was announced and guests of every rank joined in the rhythmic promenade whose solemn grace has all the significance of a national dance, the combination of floor-length gowns of layered lace and richly decorated uniforms was an indescribable vision under the glow of a hundred chandeliers, multiplied in the reflections of the

mirrors.

It was a dazzling spectacle.

What's more, the grand ballroom - the most beautiful of all the New Palace's rooms - provided a worthy backdrop to this magnificent procession of senior functionaries and their splendidly adorned wives. The rich, gilt-trimmed arches of its ceiling, already muted by a patina of age, sparkled as if bedecked by stars. The brocades of the curtains and door hangings, highlighted by their superb folds, leapt out from the creases of the heavy, undulating fabric in warm, crimson tones.

The glow from the reception rooms, softened by a light layer of condensation on the glass, filtered through the panes of the immense, rounded bay windows. From outside, its reflection was like the flames of a fire, contrasting sharply with the dark night which, for several hours now, had enveloped the glittering palace. The contrast drew the attention, too, of those guests who had not been swept up in the dancing. If they stopped to look out of the windows, they could make out here and there the vast silhouettes of various bell towers, their outlines blurred in the shadows. Below the carved balconies, they could see dozens of sentries silently patrolling, rifles flat on their shoulders; the sharp tips of their helmets were adorned with fiery plumes reflecting the explosion of lights cast from within. They heard, too, the steps of the patrols on the flagstones keeping better time, perhaps, than the dancers' steps on the parquetry floors of the ballrooms. From time to time, sentries' cries would ricochet from post to post, and every now and again, the clarion call of a bugle would mingle with the orchestra's chords, throwing its clear notes into the general harmony.

In front of the façade, still further below, dark masses stood out against the large cones of light cast from the windows of the New Palace. Boats were making their way down the river whose waters, pricked by flickering lantern light, washed over the lowest of the terraced steps.

The most important person at the ball - he whose party it was and whom General Kissoff had addressed in a manner generally reserved for sovereigns - was dressed simply in the officer's

uniform of a Chasseur of the Guard. It was by no means an affectation on his part; rather force of habit in a man paying little regard to the requirements of pomp and circumstance. His dress contrasted, of course, with the splendid outfits mingling about him, but for the most part it was his preferred attire, even amongst his dazzling escort of Georgians, Cossacks and Lezghians who were so splendidly turned out in the gleaming uniforms of the Caucasus.

He was a tall man with an affable air and a calm manner. His forehead was, however, slightly creased as he made his way from one group to another, rarely speaking. Indeed, he appeared to be paying only the vaguest attention both to the cheerful comments of his young guests and to the weightier remarks of the senior functionaries or the various members of the diplomatic corps of the principal States of Europe accredited to him. Two or three of these perceptive politicians – who, by definition, were attuned to the niceties of body language – were certain they had noticed a shadow of anxiety pass over the face of their host, the reason for which escaped them, but not a single one of them would have allowed themselves to enquire as to its cause. In any event, it was very much the intention of the officer of the Chasseurs of the Guard that his own worries remain hidden and not disrupt the ball in any way. And as he was one of those rare sovereigns whom almost an entire world had grown used to obeying, in thought quite as much as in deed, the enjoyment of the evening's ball did not falter for an instant.

General Kissoff, however, was waiting for the order to withdraw from the officer to whom he had just passed on the message contained in the dispatch from Tomsk. But the latter remained silent. He had taken the telegram and read it, and his brow had darkened still further. His hand had even wandered involuntarily to the hilt of his sword before making its way back to cover his eyes for an instant. It was almost as if the glare of the lights were blinding him and he was deliberately seeking out the darkness to better see into himself.

'So,' he resumed, after having led General Kissoff over to one of the bay windows, 'we have not been able to reach my brother, the Grand Duke, since yesterday?'

'No, Sire, and we fear that very soon dispatches will no longer be able to cross the Siberian

border.'

'But the troops in and around Amur and Yakutsk, as well as those from the Trans-Baikal region have received the order to march on Irkutsk immediately?'

'That order was given in the last telegram we were able to send beyond Lake Baikal.'

'What of Yeniseysk, Omsk, Semipalatinsk and Tobolsk? Is it still possible to communicate directly with them since the start of the invasion?'

'Yes, your Majesty, our dispatches are reaching them and we're certain that for the time being, the Tartars have not advanced beyond the Irtysh and the Ob rivers.'

'And what about the traitor, Ivan Ogareff? No news?'

'None,' replied General Kissoff. 'The Chief of Police is unable to confirm whether he has crossed the border.'

'Send his description immediately to Nizhny Novgorod, Perm, Ekaterinburg, Kasimov, Tyumen, Ishim, Omsk, Elamsk, Kolyvan and to Tomsk … to every telegraph station with which we're still connected!'

'At once, Your Majesty,' answered General Kissoff.

'And not a word about any of this!'

Then, having indicated his respectful acknowledgement, the General bowed and melted back into the crowd. Not long afterwards, he left the reception rooms, his departure going unnoticed.

The officer stood for a few minutes, a faraway look on his face. But by the time he resumed his mingling amongst the various groups of military personnel and politicians gathered here and there around the salons, the calm demeanour that moments earlier had been absent was restored once more.

However, others were not as ignorant of the serious event that had prompted the rapid exchange of words between the officer of the Chasseurs de la Garde and General Kissoff as those two men wished to believe. True, it was not officially a topic of conversation, nor even semi-

officially, as there had been no formal ‘decree’ allowing tongues to be loosened, but various senior officials had been more or less precisely informed of the nature of events taking place beyond the border. In any case, matters of which they, perhaps, knew only the gist, or which were not being discussed amongst themselves – nor even amongst members of the diplomatic corps – were indeed being discussed in low voices by two guests at that New Palace reception, guests whose identity was not obvious from any uniform or other decoration. Moreover, it appeared they were in receipt of some quite detailed information.

It was hard to say quite how, by what means, or thanks to what inside knowledge these two simple mortals knew of matters which so many others – and frankly, more important others - scarcely even suspected. Were they endowed with particular gifts of prescience or foresight? Was it a sixth sense which allowed them to see beyond the limited horizon to which all human vision is restricted? Did they have a particular flair for tracking down the most secret of stories? It would have been tempting to admit that their personalities had indeed undergone some form of transformation by virtue of their habit, by now almost second nature, of living off, and through, any information which came their way.

Of these two men, one was an Englishman, the other French. Both were tall and thin. The latter dark like the southerners from Provence. The former, a redhead, as you would expect of a gentleman from Lancashire. The Anglo-Norman, a cold, stitched-up, phlegmatic man, economical of both word and movement, appeared only to speak or gesticulate on the release of a spring which operated at regular intervals. By contrast, the Gallo-Roman, a lively, exuberant fellow, expressed himself just as much with eyes and hands as through his lips, seemingly having a dozen different ways of conveying a thought, whereas his companion appeared only to have the one, immutably wired into his brain.

These physical differences would have been obvious to even the most unobservant of men. But a good judge of character, observing the two foreigners a little more closely, would neatly have summed up the physical contrast between the two by remarking that if the Frenchman was ‘all

eyes', the Englishman was 'all ears'.

Indeed, the optical apparatus of one of the men had been unusually refined through years of use. The sensitivity of his retina had to be as instantaneous as that of a conjuror able to pick out a card simply from the rapid cutting of a deck or from the placement alone of a tarot card which nobody else observed. This Frenchman had, then, what one would describe as a photographic memory, developed to the highest degree.

The Englishman, on the other hand, seemed especially equipped both to hear and to listen. Once his auditory apparatus had been struck by the sound of a voice, he could never forget it. In ten years' time, in twenty, he would still be able to pick it from a thousand others. It's quite true that he was not able to move his ears in the same way as well-equipped animals. But as scientists have noted that human ears are only 'more or less' immobile, one could happily assert that those of the above-mentioned Englishman were indeed attempting to pick up sounds in a manner quite obvious to a naturalist by the way they perked up, twisted and inclined themselves this way and that.

It is worth observing that this perfectly heightened sense of sight and sound on the part of these two men served them both marvellously well in their chosen profession, for the Englishman was a correspondent for the *Daily Telegraph* and the Frenchman a correspondent for … well, for some newspaper or other; he wouldn't say. If anyone asked, he would reply, pleasantly enough, that he was writing to 'his cousin Madeleine'. Beneath it all, and despite his frivolous appearance, the Frenchman was very perceptive and very shrewd. While chatting about this and that, perhaps all the better to hide his interest in finding out about something or other, he would never give anything away. His effusive nature in fact helped him to remain silent, and it is possible he was more restrained, more discreet than his counterpart from the *Daily Telegraph*.

And if both of them were attending this ball being held at the New Palace on the night of the fifteenth to the sixteenth of July, it was in their capacity as journalists, and in the interests of their readers.

It goes without saying that these two men were passionate about their mission in this world,

that they were both fond of darting off like ferrets on the trail of the most unexpected stories, and that they were neither frightened nor put off by anything that could get in the way of success. They possessed the unshakeable *sang-froid* and true daring of their profession. Like jockeys in a steeplechase, they would clear hedges, ford rivers and leap hurdles in their hunt for information with the incomparable zeal of those thoroughbreds whose only wish is to get there first … or die!

Moreover, neither of their newspapers were sparing with money - that most certain, most rapid and most ideal component of information-gathering ever known. It should also be added, in defence of their reputation, that neither one of them would ever listen or peer over the walls of private life. They would only ever take action if political or social interests were at stake. In a word, they were engaged in what for several years now has been known as ‘macro-political and strategic reportage.’

Only, if one observed them closely, it was evident that for the most part they had rather an unusual way of regarding the facts and, above all, their consequences. Each of them had ‘his own special way’ of seeing things and interpreting them. But ultimately, given their wholehearted approach to everything, never ones to spare themselves, it would have been bad form to hold that against them.

The French correspondent was called Alcide Jolivet. Harry Blount was the name of the Englishman. They had just met for the first time at this ball at the New Palace which they were covering for their respective newspapers. Their contrasting personalities, coupled with a certain professional jealousy, should have ensured they would not get along particularly well. However, they did not try to avoid one another, instead seeking to feel each other out about the news stories of the day. After all, they were both hunters, working the same territory, on the same reserves. If one of them missed, it was open to the other to make the shot, their mutual interests even requiring them to stay within eye and earshot of the other.

So, that evening, they were both on the lookout. There was no doubting there was something in the air.

‘Even if it were only a flight of ducks passing over, it would be worth taking a shot!’ said Alcide Jolivet to himself.

And so the two correspondents found themselves chatting at the ball, moments after General Kissoff had taken his leave, both of them testing each other out a little.

‘Really, Monsieur, this little party is quite *charmante*!’ commented Alcide Jolivet agreeably, thinking to strike up a conversation with such an eminently French remark.

‘I have already wired: splendid!’ replied Harry Blount, coldly, using that very British term of approbation.

‘And yet,’ added Alcide Jolivet, ‘I really thought I should add, for my cousin’s benefit …’

‘Your cousin? …’ repeated Harry Blount, surprised, interrupting his colleague.

‘Yes, … my cousin Madeleine,’ resumed Alcide Jolivet … ‘It is with her that I’m corresponding! She does like to be informed quickly and accurately, that cousin of mine! … And so, as I was saying, I did think I should note that a sort of cloud seems to have darkened His Majesty’s brow over the course of the evening.’

‘Well, to me he appeared to be beaming,’ replied Harry Blount, perhaps seeking to conceal his own thoughts on the matter.

‘And, of course, you had him *beaming* in the columns of the *Daily Telegraph*!’

‘Precisely.’

‘Do you recall, Mister Blount,’ said Alcide Jolivet, ‘what happened at Zakret in 1812?’

‘I remember it as if I had been there myself, Monsieur,’ answered the English journalist.

‘Well then,’ said Alcide Jolivet, ‘you’ll know that in the middle of a ball being held in honour of Tsar Alexander, the Tsar was told that Napoleon had just crossed the Nieman River with the French vanguard. However, the Tsar did not leave the party, and despite the extreme seriousness of news which might have cost him the Empire, he did not display any more anxiety …’

‘…than our host revealed when General Kissoff told him that the telegraphic wires had just been cut between the border and the prefecture of Irkutsk.’

‘Ah! You know about that?’

‘I do.’

‘Well, for my part, it would be hard not to know about it, seeing as my last telegram made it as far as Udinsk,’ observed Alcide Jolivet with a certain satisfaction.

‘And mine only as far as Krasnoyarsk,’ answered Harry Blount in no less smug a tone.

‘So you know, too, that orders have been sent to the troops at Nikolaevsk?’

‘Yes, Monsieur, at the same time as wires were being sent to the Cossacks in Tobolsk to start mobilising.’

‘All of which is quite true, Mister Blount. I, too, was perfectly aware of those developments and, believe me, my dear cousin will know of it as early as tomorrow!’

‘Just as the readers of the *Daily Telegraph* will, Monsieur Jolivet.’

‘*Voilà*! When one sees what is happening …!’

‘And hears what is being said …!’

‘It’ll be an interesting campaign to follow, Mister Blount.’

‘And follow it I shall, Monsieur Jolivet.’

‘Indeed, it’s quite possible we shall find ourselves meeting up again on somewhat less stable ground than the parquetry floor of this ballroom!’

‘Less stable, yes, but …’

‘But also less slippery!’ replied Alcide Jolivet, catching his colleague just as the latter stepped back, almost losing his balance.

And with that, the two journalists went their separate ways, all in all quite content to know that neither one had yet outdistanced the other. Indeed they were neck and neck.

Just then, the doors to the rooms adjoining the grand ballroom were opened to reveal several enormous tables, magnificently set and laden with a profusion of fine porcelain and golden china. There, glittering on the central table reserved for princes, princesses and members of the diplomatic corps, stood a centrepiece of unimaginable value, brought in from the goldsmiths of London. And

surrounding this masterpiece, under the light of the chandeliers, sparkled a thousand pieces of the most stunning porcelain dinner service ever to have left the Sèvres workshops.

The guests at the New Palace started to make their way towards the supper rooms. At that moment, General Kissoff, who had just returned, rapidly approached the officer of the Chasseurs of the Guard.

'Well then?' the latter demanded briskly of the General, just as he had done earlier.

'Telegrams are no longer making it past Tomsk, Sire.'

'Find me a courier, then. At once!'

The officer left the grand ballroom and went through to a vast adjoining room. It was a study, plainly furnished in old oak and situated in a corner of the New Palace. A number of paintings, including several canvasses signed by Horace Vernet, hung on the walls.

The officer opened the window briskly, as if he were lacking oxygen in his lungs, and stepped out onto a broad balcony to breathe the pure air of this beautiful July night.

Spread out below him, bathed in moonlight, was a fortified wall encircling two cathedrals, three palaces and an arsenal. And beyond the fortification itself was sketched the outline of three distinct neighbourhoods, Kitai-Gorod, Beloi-Gorod and Zemlianoi-Gorod, large *quartiers* that were home to Europeans, Tartars and Chinese, overshadowed by the spires, bell-towers, minarets and green domes of three hundred churches topped with silver crosses. Here and there a small, meandering river caught the rays of the moon. It all worked to form a curious mosaic of brightly coloured buildings set in an enormous frame ten leagues in diameter.

That river was the Moskva, the town was Moscow, and that fortified precinct was the Kremlin. And the officer of the Chasseurs of the Guard who, with arms crossed and a pensive brow, was listening vaguely to the noise drifting across the old Muscovite town centre from the New Palace, was the Tsar.