

Michael Strogoff,

THE COURIER OF THE CZAR.

By Jules Verne.

CHAPTER XV.—CONTINUED.

In buying it at Omsk, he had been lucky; and taking him to that postmaster, the generous manjik had rendered him a great service. Besides, if Michael Strogoff had already taken a fancy to his horse, the beast itself seemed to conform little by little to the fatigues of such a journey, and by allowing it a few hours rest daily, its rider might hope that it would bear him beyond the invaded provinces. Hence, during the evening and the night of 2d and 3d of August, Michael Strogoff remained in his hotel on the outskirts of the city; hotel little patronized, and thus sheltered from curious and importunate visitors. Broken with fatigue, he went to bed, after having taken care that his horse was well provided for the night; but he could only obtain a broken and intermittent slumber. Too many remembrances, too many anxieties, assailed him. The image of his old mother, that of his young and intrepid companion left behind him, both without protection, passed alternately before his mind, and were intermixed in all his thoughts. Then he thought of his mission, which he had sworn to fulfil: of what he had seen since his departure from Moscow, proving to him more and more how important it was. The movement was of the most serious character, and the complexity of Ogareff rendered it more dreadful still. And when his eyes fell on the letter bearing the imperial seal—that letter, which, no doubt, contained the remedy for so many sufferings, the salvation of all that country, torn to pieces by war—Michael Strogoff felt in him an intense desire to rush over the steppe, to cross, as a crow would fly, the distance to Irkutsk; to be an eagle so as to rise above all obstacles; to be a hurricane to pass through the air with the rapidity of one hundred versts to the hour, to arrive, in fine, before the grand duke, and cry to him: "Altesse! from his Majesty the Czar!" On the following morning, at six o'clock, Michael Strogoff started with the intention of making the eighty versts (eighty-five kilometers) from Kamsk to the hamlet of Oubinsk. Beyond a radius of twenty versts he found again the marshes of Baraba, which no drainage could there dry up, and upon the soil of which was often a foot of water. The road was then difficult to find; but with his extreme prudence, the crossing was effected without accident. Michael Strogoff, reaching Oubinsk, left his horse to rest all night, for he wanted, the following day, to devour the one hundred versts between Oubinsk and Kouleskoe. He started at daybreak, but unfortunately, in that part of the country, the soil of the Baraba is more and more detestable. In fact, between Oubinsk and Kamakora, rain having been very abundant a few weeks before, had filled that depression of the land like a water-tight tub. There was even no break in the continuity of that endless network of sloughs, ponds and lakes. One of those lakes—considerable enough to be admitted in the geographical catalogue—called Tchajang by the Chinese—must be followed on its borders for more than twenty versts, and with very great difficulty. Delays therefore occurred which all the impatience of Michael Strogoff could not prevent. He had acted wisely when he refused to take a carriage at Kamsk, for his horse passed where no vehicle could have succeeded. At eight Michael Strogoff arrived at nine o'clock at Kouleskoe, and stopped till the following morning. There was absolutely no news of war in that lost village of the Baraba. By its nature even that portion of the province situated at the fork formed by the two Tartar columns, in dividing, one on Omsk, the other on Tomsk, had escaped the horrors of the invasion. But the natural difficulties were to become less at last, for if he had no unexpected delay, Michael Strogoff was to leave the Baraba on the morrow. He would then have a practical route when he would have traversed the one hundred and twenty-five versts (133 kilometers) remaining between him and Kolyvan. When arrived at this town he would be at equal distance from Tomsk. He would then take advice from circumstances, and very probably he would decide how to pass by that city which Peofar-Khan occupied, if the news was correct. But if these towns, such as Kouleskoe, or Karguinsk, which he passed the day after, were comparatively quiet, thanks to their situation in the Baraba, where the Tartar columns would have maneuvered with difficulty, was it not to be feared, on the richer shores of the Obi, Michael Strogoff, having no more physical obstacles to overcome, would have all to apprehend from man? It was not improbable. However, if it was necessary he would not hesitate to quit the route to Irkutsk. He would evidently not hesitate to travel through the trackless steppe, and dare its dangers of starvation and death. There, in fact, he would no longer find a path, no more cities or villages; hardly even a few isolated farms, or simple huts of poor people, no doubt hospitable, but where he could hardly find the necessities of life. Nevertheless there was no alternative. Finally, at about half-past three o'clock, when being beyond Kargat-station, Michael Strogoff left the last depressions of the Baraba, and the hard and dry soil of the Siberian territory resounded under the feet of his horse. He had left Moscow on the 15th of July. Therefore, that day, the 5th of August, including more than seventy hours lost on the borders of the Irtych, twenty-one days had passed since he started. Fifteen hundred versts yet remained before reaching Irkutsk.

not be abandoned. He visited many. All... "A hut which he perceived among the trees was nevertheless still smoking when he approached. He saw at a few paces from the house an old man surrounded by crying children; a woman yet young, his daughter, no doubt, and the mother of those little ones, kneeling on the ground, gazing begrudgingly upon that scene of desolation; she was nursing a child who would soon miss her wonted nourishment. All round that family was nothing but ruin and desolation! Michael Strogoff went to the old man. "Can you answer me?" said he, gravely. "Speak," answered the old man. "Have the Tartars passed here?" "Yes, since my house is in flames." "Was it an army or a detachment?" "An army, since, as far as your eye can see our fields are devastated." "Commanded by the Emir?" "By the Emir, since the waters of the Obi have become red." "And Peofar-Khan has entered Tomsk?" "Tomsk." "Do you know if the Tartars have taken Kolyvan?" "No, since Kolyvan does not burn yet." "Thanks, friend. Can I do something for you and yours?" "Nothing." "Good-bye." "Adieu." Michael Strogoff placed twenty-five roubles on the knees of the unfortunate woman, who had not even the strength to thank him, and spurred on his horse to continue his course, interrupted for a moment. He had learned one thing; by all means he must avoid passing by Tomsk. To go to Kolyvan, where the Tartars had not arrived yet, was possible. He must first provide against the long journey. Next, throw himself out of the route of Irkutsk, to turn Tomsk, after having crossed the Obi. There was no other course to pursue. This new route once determined, Michael Strogoff had no need to hesitate an instant. He did not hesitate. Giving to his horse a more rapid and regular speed, he followed the direct route leading to the left bank of the Obi, from which he was yet forty versts distant. Will he find a boat to cross it? or, the Tartars having destroyed the skiffs of the river, shall he be forced to cross it by swimming? He would take counsel. As to his horse, now well exhausted, Michael Strogoff, after having called for what strength it had left for this last feat, must try to exchange it for another at Kolyvan. He felt that the poor beast would fall under him before long. Kolyvan then was to become a new starting point, for from that city his journey would assume new phases. As long as he traveled over the devastated country, great difficulties remained; but if, after avoiding Tomsk, he could take the route to Irkutsk through the province of Yeniseisk, which was not yet invaded by the destroyers, he must reach his destination in a few days. Night had come after a quite warm day. At midnight, the darkness covered the steppe. The wind, completely still since sunset, did not disturb the perfect calmness of the atmosphere. The only sound that reached the ear was the galloping of the horse on the deserted road, and the occasional words of encouragement from its master. Amid that darkness an extreme attention was necessary to keep the road, bordered with ponds and small rivulets, tributaries of the Obi. Should he lose the road, where might he not wander? Perhaps, in a vain effort to regain it, he might, without a single friendly star to guide him, continue to hasten in a wrong direction, so that even when the kindly sun again shone, he would be so far away that, despite its aid, he might be unable, in that unfamiliar and scantily populated country to return to the road for perhaps even two or three days. In that case his horse would infallibly fall him, and, forced to proceed on foot, he, too, might perish amid the dreary solitudes. Then, with his death, his master's mission would fail of accomplishment, and the emperor would never even learn whether his courier was faithful or dead. Hence Michael advanced as rapidly as possible, but with a certain prudence. He had confidence not only in the excellence of his eyes, which pierced the darkness like those of an owl, but also in the circumspection of his horse, whose sagacity he had proved. At this moment, Michael Strogoff, having alighted, trying to discover exactly the direction of his course, fancied that he heard a confused murmur coming from the west. It was like the noise of a far-distant clattering of the feet of horses on dry land, no doubt one or two miles behind him—a certain cadence of steps striking the ground regularly. Michael Strogoff listened more attentively, placing his ear at the intersection of two roads. "It is a detachment of horsemen coming by the road of Omsk," said he to himself. "They travel swiftly, for the noise increases. Are they Russians or Tartars?" Michael Strogoff listened again. "Yes," said he, "those horsemen come at a great speed. Before ten minutes they will be here! My horse cannot outrun them. If they are Russians I will join them. If they are Tartars, I must avoid them. But how? Where can I hide myself in this barren steppe?" Michael Strogoff looked around and his eye discovered a mass confusedly situated, at about a hundred steps from him on the left. "There are some bushes," said he. "If I seek refuge there, I perhaps expose myself to be taken, should they search here; but I have no choice! They are here!" In a few moments Michael Strogoff, dragging his horse after him, reached a small thicket of fir trees, which the road led to. Beyond, and on this side, completely stripped of trees, the road wound between quagmires and ponds, which were separated by dwarf bushes of reeds and heath. On both sides the ground was absolutely impassable, and the troop must, of course, therefore pass in front of that little thicket, since they followed the road to Irkutsk. Michael Strogoff threw himself under cover of the fir trees, and advancing about forty paces, he was stopped by a river which inclosed the thicket in a half circular embrace. But the shade was so dense that Michael Strogoff ran no risk of discovery unless the small grove should be carefully searched. He led his horse to the river and tied it to a tree, and then stretched himself on the skirt of the thicket to ascertain with whom he had to deal. Hardly had Michael Strogoff placed himself behind a tree, when a confused light appeared, which was reflected here and there from a few brilliant points moving in the darkness. "Torches!" said he. And he quickly drew back, alighting like an Indian, in the thickest portion of the grove. As the horsemen neared the thicket, they slackened their speed. Were they lighting the road with the intention of discovering any suspicious signs? Michael Strogoff had reason to fear it, and, as by instinct, he sunk back to the river, ready to plunge into it, if necessary. The detachment arrived at the grove and

halted. The riders alighted. They were about fifty in number. Ten carried torches to light the route for a considerable distance about them. Michael Strogoff saw by certain preparations that fortunately the squadron did not think it necessary to visit the bushes, but were about to bivouac to rest their horses, and to give opportunity to the men to take some refreshment. (In fact, the unbridled horses began to graze the thick grass which carpeted the ground. As to the horsemen, they stretched their limbs on the border of the road and partook of the provisions in their baggy sacks. Michael Strogoff had retained all his coolness, and crawling between the high shrubs, he tried to see and to hear. It was a detachment coming from Omsk. It was composed of Usbeck horsemen, the predominant race in Tartary, whose type is nearly similar to the Mongolians. Those men, well built, of high stature and rude and savage traits, wore covered with the "talpak," a kind of black sheepskin bonnet, and with yellowish boots of whose tips were raised in a point, like the shoe of the middle centuries. Their mantles were made of calico wadded with crude cotton, bound at the waist with a belt spotted with red leather. They were armed for defense with a shield, for offense with a curved sabre, a long knife and a gun hanging at their saddle-bow. Over their shoulders draped a burnous of felt of a brilliant color. The horses grazing free on the skirt of the wood, were of Usbeck race, like their owners. That was easily seen in the light of the torches under the branches of the fir trees. These animals, smaller than the Turco horse, but endowed with a remarkable strength, are those running beasts which know no other speed than the gallop. That detachment was led by a "pendjabaschi," i.e., a commander of fifty men, having under his orders a "deh-baschi," commanding only ten men. Those two officers wore a casque and a half coat of mail; small trumpets at their saddle-bow formed the distinctive sign of their rank. The pendjabaschi had ordered his men to rest after a long journey. In talking, the second officer and himself smoking the "beng," a leaf of hemp which forms the base of "bachschich," of which the Asiatics use great quantities, went to and fro in the wood, so that Michael Strogoff without himself being seen, could see and hear all of their movements and conversation, for they spoke in the Tartary tongue. From the first words of that conversation the attention of Michael Strogoff was strongly interested. Indeed, it concerned him. "That courier cannot have advanced so much ahead of us," said the pendjabaschi, "and, on another hand, it is impossible for him to have taken any other route than the Baraba." "Who knows if he has left Omsk?" answered the deh-baschi. "Perhaps he is hidden still in some house of the city!" "I wish it was so indeed! Colonel Ogareff would have no reason to fear that the dispatches carried by that courier would reach their destination!" "They say he is a Siberian," replied the deh-baschi. "As such he must know the country, and it is possible that he has left the route to Irkutsk to return to it afterward!" "But then we would not be ahead of him," answered the pendjabaschi. "For we left Omsk less than an hour after him, and we have followed the shortest route, with all the swiftness of our horses. Therefore, he is either at Omsk or we are before him at Tomsk, so as to prevent his retreat; and, in both cases, he will not reach Irkutsk." "A fierce woman, that Siberian who is evidently his mother!" said the deh-baschi. "At those words the heart of Michael Strogoff leaped as if to break his breast. "Yes," answered the pendjabaschi, "she acted well, but in denying that the supposed merchant was her son, it was too late. Colonel Ogareff could not be deceived, and as he said, he knew how to make the old witch speak, when the time came!" As many words, as many pointed strokes for Michael Strogoff! He was recognized as a courier to the Czar! A detachment of horsemen thrown after him could not fail to intercept his way! And, supreme anguish! his mother was in the hands of the Tartars, and the cruel Ogareff thought himself able to make her speak when he desired it! Michael Strogoff knew well that the old Siberian would not speak, and that it would cost her her life! Michael Strogoff thought not to hate Ogareff more than he had done up to now, yet nevertheless, a wave of new hatred swelled in his heart. The infamous man who betrayed his country threatened now to torture his mother! The conversation went on between the officers, and Michael Strogoff understood that in the neighborhood of Kolyvan, an engagement was imminent between the Muscovite troops, coming from the north, and the Tartars. A small body of two thousand Russians, announced on the lower part of the Obi, was coming by forced marches toward Tomsk. If such was the case, that body going to engage the large body of the troops of Peofar-Khan would be unavoidably annihilated; and the route to Irkutsk would then be completely in the power of the invaders. As to himself, Michael Strogoff learned, by a few words of the pendjabaschi, that a price was set on his head, and an order to take him dead or alive had been given. Hence the necessity to distance the Usbecks on the route to Irkutsk, and to place the Obi between him and them. But for that, he had to fly before they would break their bivouac. Having formed that resolution, Michael Strogoff prepared to execute it. In fact, the halt could not last long; and the pendjabaschi thought to give but an hour's rest to his men, although they had not exchanged their horses for fresh ones since leaving Omsk, and their beasts must have been as wearied as that of Michael Strogoff. Not an instant to lose them. It was one in the morning. He must profit by the darkness which the dawn would soon chase away, to leave the thicket and take the route; but though the thicket favored him, the success of such a flight appeared almost impossible. Michael Strogoff did not want to leave anything to chance. He took his time to reflect and weigh carefully the change for and against, so as to make the best in his power. From his examination of the situation he arrived at this conclusion: "He could not escape behind the grove, closed in by an arc of trees. The river lying that way was not only deep, but wide and muddy. Great reeds rendered its passage impossible. Under that slimy water one felt a miry bottom on which the foot could find no support. Besides, beyond the water, the ground covered with bushes impeded a rapid flight, pursued without mercy and soon encircled, would inevitably fall into the hands of the Tartars. Only one practicable way remained—the great route. To try and reach it by turning the skirt of the wood, without awaking their attention; to cross one fourth of a mile before being seen; to demand of his horse all its remaining energy and strength, were it to fall

dead, in reaching the Obi; then, on a boat or by swimming, if all other means failed him to cross that important river—this is what Michael Strogoff had to do! His energy, his courage were tenfold stronger in face of danger. His life was in jeopardy, his mission, the honor of his country, perhaps the safety of his mother, were in peril. He could not hesitate, but set to work instantly. Indeed, there was no time to lose. Already a certain movement was seen among the men of the squadron. Several horsemen were going here and there on the slope of the road in front of the wood. The others were still at the foot of the trees, but their horses gathered little by little toward the center of the grove. Michael Strogoff at first thought to seize one of those horses, but he reflected, with reason, that they were as tired as his own. Better, then, to confide in the one of which he was sure, and which had rendered him so many services. That courageous animal, hidden by a high bush of heaths, had escaped the notice of the Usbecks. These, besides, had not gone so far as the extreme limit of the wood. Michael Strogoff, crawling on the grass, approached his horse, which was lying on the ground. He caressed it, he spoke softly in its ear, and succeeded in rousing it without noise. At that moment—favorable circumstance—the torches, completely consumed, sunk in darkness, and the gloom of the night was yet intense under the cover of the trees. Michael Strogoff, having bridled and saddled his horse, and tested the stirrups, began to lead his beast slowly by the bridle. Besides, the intelligent animal, as if it understood what was wanted of it, followed its master without the least noise. Yet a few Usbeck horses picked their ears and went little by little toward the skirt of the thicket. Michael Strogoff had his hand on his revolver, ready to crush the skull of the first Tartar cavalier who might approach him. But, fortunately, the alarm was not given and he might yet reach the angle of the wood bordering the road. The intention of Michael Strogoff was to avoid discovery by jumping on his saddle only at the latest possible moment, and only after having passed a turning point at two hundred steps from the thicket. Michael Strogoff had his hand on his revolver, ready to crush the skull of the first Tartar cavalier who might approach him. But, fortunately, the alarm was not given and he might yet reach the angle of the wood bordering the road. The intention of Michael Strogoff was to avoid discovery by jumping on his saddle only at the latest possible moment, and only after having passed a turning point at two hundred steps from the thicket. Michael Strogoff had his hand on his revolver, ready to crush the skull of the first Tartar cavalier who might approach him. But, fortunately, the alarm was not given and he might yet reach the angle of the wood bordering the road. 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