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THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

Michael Strogoff had been able to see neither the insult nor the insulting person, but Nicholas had seen for him.

Then quietly, without having reflected, without perhaps having any consciousness of his action, Nicholas made straight for the soldier, and before the latter could make any movement to stop him, snatching a pistol from the pommel of his saddle, he discharged it full at his breast.

The officer who had command of the detachment ran up immediately at the sound of the pistol.

The horsemen were about to cut Nicholas in pieces, but at a sign from the officer they bound him fast with cords, they flung him across a horse, and the detachment set off at a gallop.

The cord which tied Michael Strogoff, gnawed by him, broke at an unexpected dash of the horse, and its rider, half drunk, carried away in a quick run, did not even perceive it.

Michael Strogoff and Nadia found themselves alone on the road.

CHAPTER XV.

MICHAEL STROGOFF and Nadia were once more free, as they had been during the journey from Perm to the banks of the Irkutsk. But how changed were the circumstances

of the journey! Then a comfortable vehicle, teams often renewed, well provided post horses, secured for them a quick journey. Now they went on foot, with an impossibility of procuring for themselves any means of locomotion, without resources, not knowing even how to procure the least wants of life, and they had still to make 400 versts! And, moreover, Michael Strogoff now only saw through the eyes of Nadia.

As for the friend whom chance had given them, they had just lost him under the most affecting circumstances.

It was 10 o'clock at night. For the last three hours and a half the sun had disappeared below the horizon. There was not a house, not a hut, in sight. The last Tartars were lost in the distance. Michael Strogoff and Nadia were indeed alone.

"To what place shall I lead you, Michael?"

"To Irkutsk," he answered.

"By the highroad?"

"Yes, Nadia."

Nadia took the hand of Michael Strogoff, and they once more set out on their journey.

Next morning, Sept. 12, twenty versts farther, at the town of Toulounovskoe, both halted for a short time. The town was burned down and was deserted.

During that day they had to pass the little stream of the Oka, but it was fordable, and that passage offered no difficulty.

But, contrary to what Michael Strogoff had perhaps hoped, there was not any longer a single beast of burden in the country. Every horse, every camel, had been either killed or taken away. It was therefore on foot they must cross this never ending steppe.

And thus they walked on for three days.

Several times Nadia was obliged to stop. Michael Strogoff then took her in his arms, and for the moment, not having to think of Nadia's fatigue, while carrying her he marched more quickly and with his untiring pace.

On the 18th of September, at 10 o'clock at night, both reached at length Kimiliskoe. From the top of a hill Nadia perceived a line a little less dark on the horizon. It was the Dinka.

Suddenly they stopped, as if their feet had stepped into some crevice in the ground.

A dog's bark was heard across the steppe.

"Do you hear?" said Nadia.

Then came a lamentable cry, a cry of despair, like the last appeal of a human being who is about to die.

"Nicholas! Nicholas!" cried the young girl, urged on by some evil foreboding. Michael Strogoff, who listened, hung down his head.

"Come, Michael, come!" said Nadia.

And she who just before could scarcely drag herself along suddenly recovered her strength under the sway of violent excitement.

"Have we left the road?" said Michael Strogoff, feeling that he was treading no longer the dusty road, but the open grass field.

"Yes, it is necessary," answered Nadia. "It is from over there on the right that the cry came."

Some minutes afterward the two were only half a verst from the river.

A second bark was heard, and, although more feeble, it was certainly nearer.

Nadia stopped.

"Yes," said Michael, "it is Serko who is barking. He has followed his master."

"Nicholas!" cried the young girl. Her call remained unanswered. Only some birds of prey rose up and disappeared amid the high clouds of heaven. Michael Strogoff listened. Nadia looked at the plain. It up with flashes of lightning in rapid succession, but she saw nothing.

And yet a voice came again, this time murmured in a plaintive tone, "Michael!"

Then a dog, all bleeding, came bounding up to Nadia. It was Serko. Nicholas could not be far away. He

alone could murmur that name of Michael. Where was he? Nadia had not even the strength to call out to him.

Michael Strogoff, lying on the ground, searched with his hand.

Suddenly Serko gave a fresh bark and rushed toward a gigantic bird, which was clawing the ground.

It was a vulture. When Serko precipitated himself upon it, it rose up; but, returning to the charge, it struck the dog.

He again renewed the attack, but he received a blow on the head from that terrible beak, and this time Serko fell back dead on the ground.

At the same time a cry of horror escaped from Nadia.

"There, there!" said she.

A head rose just above the ground! It would have struck against their feet had it not been for the intense brightness that the heavens cast upon the steppe.

Nadia fell on her knees near that head.

Nicholas, buried up to the neck, according to the atrocious customs of the Tartars, had been abandoned on the steppe to three die of hunger and thirst and perhaps to be torn into pieces by the fangs of wolves or the beaks of birds of prey. A most horrible punishment for the victim thus imprisoned in the earth, who presses the earth without being able to cast it off, having his arms tied and fastened to his body like those of a corpse in a coffin! The victim, lying in this clay mold, which he is unable to break, can do nothing but implore death, which is too slow in coming!

It was there the Tartars had interred their prisoner for three days. For three days Nicholas had been waiting for succor, which had come at last too late.

The vultures had perceived that head exposed to the sun's rays, and for some hours the dog defended his master against these ferocious birds.

Michael Strogoff dug the earth with his claspknife to release it from that imprisoned body.

The eyes of Nicholas, closed until then, once more opened themselves.

He recognized Michael and Nadia. Then he murmured:

"Adieu, friends. I am happy to have seen you once more. Pray for me."

And these words were the last.

Michael Strogoff continued to dig the soil, which, being strongly trodden down, had the hardness of a rock, and at length he succeeded in drawing from it the body of the unfortunate man. He listened if his heart still beat. It beat no more!

He wished then to bury it, that it might not remain exposed on the steppe, and that hole in which Nicholas had been buried alive he enlarged and deepened in such a manner as to be able to lay him there when dead. The faithful Serko was placed near his master.

At that moment a great noise was heard on the road about half a verst away.

Michael Strogoff listened.

By the noise he knew at once that a detachment of cavalry was advancing toward the Dinka.

"Nadia, Nadia!" said he in a low voice.

At his voice Nadia, who had remained in prayer, rose up.

"You see them! You see them!" he said to her.

"The Tartars!" she murmured.

It was indeed with deafening quickness on the road to Irkutsk.

"They shall not prevent me from interring him," said Michael Strogoff.

And he continued his work.

Soon Nicholas' body, with his hands joined on his breast, was laid in the tomb. Michael Strogoff and Nadia, kneeling down, prayed the last time for that poor being, good and inoffensive, who through devotedness to them had lost his life.

"And now," said Michael, throwing back the earth, "the wolves of the steppe shall not devour him."

Then his hand stretched in menace toward the troop of horsemen which was passing.

"On our journey, Nadia!" said he.

Michael Strogoff could no longer follow the highroad, now occupied by the Tartars. He must throw himself across the steppe and turn Irkutsk. In doing this they would have to cross the Dinka and thus would be relieved from one great anxiety.

Nadia could no longer drag herself along, but she could see for him. He took her in his arms and struck into the southwest of the province.

There remained for them to travel more than 200 versts. How could it be done? How could food be found on the journey?

By what superhuman energy would they succeed in passing the first slopes of the Sayansk mountains? Neither Nadia nor he could tell.

And yet twelve days after, at 6 o'clock in the evening, an immense sheet of water rolled at the feet of Michael Strogoff.

To be Continued.

The man who keeps his mouth closed on matters that don't concern him has brains in his head.

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