

St. Mary's Bells.

Bells that crown St. Mary's shrine. Bright draped and decked with summer flowers. Ring out your homilies divine. Like messengers from Eden's bowers. Girt by the saints whose names ye bear. Behold the vision of the sacred land. And her, the Queen our souls reverse, The centre of the shining band.

Michael Strogoff,

OR, THE COURIER OF THE CZAR.

By Jules Verne.

PART II.

CHAPTER VIII.—CONTINUED.

Still it was necessary to continue to follow this route until it should be manifestly impossible to do so, without falling into the hands of the invaders. There was therefore, no change of route, although traces of ruin and devastation accumulated as they passed through each village. All those little towns whose names tell us that they have been founded by Polish exiles, had been given up to all the horrors of pillage and fire. The blood of the victims had not, as yet completely dried up. They could not learn anything of the circumstances that had brought about these sad events, for there was not a living soul there to tell them.

That very day, towards four o'clock in the afternoon Nicholas descried on the horizon the high bellies of the churches of Nijni-Oudinsk. They were crowned with thick columns of vapor which could not be clouds. Nicholas and Nadia looked, and communicated to Michael Strogoff the result of their observations. They must decide their course of action at once. If the town had been abandoned, they could pass through it without any risk, but it, by a movement that they could not explain, the Tartars already occupied it, they must turn it at any price.

"Let us advance prudently," said Michael Strogoff, "but let us advance."

"Another verb was made. "Those are not clouds, it is smoke!" cried Nadia. "Brother, they are burning the town!"

And indeed, it was only too visible. Bright flames shot up above the smoke, and whirlwinds of flame mounted thicker and thicker into the sky. Besides, there were no fugitives. It was probable that the incendiaries had found the city abandoned, and had set it on fire. But were the Tartars doing this, or were the Russians the authors of it, in obedience to the orders of the Grand Duke? Had the government of the Czar wished that from Krasnoyarsk, from the Yenisei, not a town, not a village should offer refuge to the soldiers of the Emir? But what most concerned Michael Strogoff, was as to whether he should stop here, or continue his journey.

He was undecided. Nevertheless, after having well thought over it, he considered that whatever might be the fatigues of a journey across the steppe, he must not risk the chance of falling a second time into the hands of the Tartars. He was about to propose to Nicholas to leave the route, and, in case of necessity, only to regain it after having turned Nijni-Oudinsk, when the sound of a gun was heard on the right. A ball hissed, and the horse in the kibitka, struck in the head, fell dead.

At the same instant a dozen horsemen threw them on the road, and the kibitka was surrounded. Michael Strogoff, Nadia and Nicholas, without having had time to recover themselves, were prisoners, and being led rapidly towards Nijni-Oudinsk.

Michael Strogoff in this sudden attack, had lost none of his sang-froid. Not having been able to see his enemies, he had not dreamed of defending himself. Had he had the use of his eyes, he would not have attempted it. He would have only caused the massacre of the three. But if he could not see, he could hear what they said, and understand it.

And, indeed, by their language he recognized, that these soldiers were Tartars, and by their conversation that they were preceding the main army of the invaders.

Here are a few of the things he learnt, both from their discourse at the moment before him, and from some items of conversation which he afterwards picked up.

These soldiers were not directly under the orders of the Emir, who was still detained beyond the Yenisei. They were a portion of a third column, more especially composed of Tartars from the khans of Khokand and Kondouze, with which the army of Feofar had shortly to form a junction in the neighborhood of Irkutsk.

It was by the advice of Ivan Orareff, and in order to insure the success of the invasion in the provinces in the east, that this column, after having crossed the frontier of the government of Semipalatinsk, and passed to the south of Lake Balk had, had skirted the base of the Altai Mountains. Pillaging and ravaging and under the leadership of an officer of the Khan of Kondouze, it had gained the high water-courses of the Yenisei. There, foreseeing what had been done at Krasnoyarsk by order of the czar, and in order to facilitate the passage over the river for the troops of the Emir, this officer had thrown across the current a bridge of boats, which would allow Feofar to retake on the right bank the route to Irkutsk. Afterwards this third column, having traversed the foot of the mountain, had marched down the valley of the Yenisei, and rejoined that route on the heights of Alskewek. From there, from that little town, there was that terrible accumulation of ruins, which is the special mark of Tartar wars. Nijni-Oudinsk had just suffered the common

fate, and the Tartars, to the number of fifty thousand had already left it, in order to go to take up their first positions before Irkutsk. Before long they were to be joined by the Emir's troops.

Such was the situation at this date—a most grave situation for that part of Eastern Siberia, completely isolated, and for the defenders, relatively, few of its capital.

These are the things of which Michael Strogoff was informed, arrival before Irkutsk of a third column of Tartars, early junction of the Emir and Ivan Orareff with the main body of their forces. Consequently, the investment of Irkutsk and the surrender which must follow would only be an affair of time, perhaps of a time very short.

One can understand what thoughts must have besieged Michael Strogoff! Who could be astonished if, in this situation, he had at last lost all courage, all hope? He was nothing of the kind, and his lips murmured no other words than these:

"I shall arrive!"

In a half hour after the attack of the Tartar horsemen Michael Strogoff, Nicholas, and Nadia entered Nijni-Oudinsk. The faithful dog had followed them, but at a distance. They could not stay in the city, which was in flames, and which the last marauders were just quitting.

The prisoners were then thrown upon horses and led quickly away. Nicholas, resigned as ever, Nadia not at all shaken in her faith in Michael Strogoff; Michael Strogoff indifferent in appearance, but ready to seize upon every occasion of escaping.

The Tartars had soon perceived that one of their prisoners was blind, and their natural barbarity led them to make jest of their misfortune. They marched quickly. The horse of Michael Strogoff, having no other guide but his blind rider, and going by chance, stepped very often aside, and caused disorder in the detachment. On this account injuries, brutalities, quickly crushed the heart of Nadia and filled Nicholas with indignation. But what could they do? They did not speak the same language as these Tartars, and their intervention was mercilessly rejected.

And even soon, these soldiers, by a refinement of cruelty, had the idea of changing the horse on which Michael Strogoff was mounted for another that was blind. When brought about this change was this reflection by one of the horsemen, which had been heard by Michael Strogoff:

"But, perhaps, after all, this Russian can see."

This took place at sixty versts from Nijni-Oudinsk, between the towns of Tatan and Chibarinskoe. They had then placed Michael Strogoff on this horse, at the same time ironically placing the reins in his hands; and, by thrashing it with the whip, and by blows from stones, while making it wild with shouts, they sent it forward at a gallop.

As the animal could not be kept in a right line by its rider, blind like itself, at one time it would strike against a tree, at another it would be thrown out of the route, hence collisions, and even falls, which might have been fatal.

Michael Strogoff did not protest. Not a complaint was heard from him. If his horse fell he waited until they came to raise it; and indeed, they would make it raise, and the cruel game was continued.

Nicholas, at the sight of such treatment, could not contain himself. He wished to run to the protection of his companion. They stopped him and treated him like a brute.

At length this game would have been prolonged for a long time, without doubt, and to the great amusement of the Tartars, if not a serious accident had not put a stop to it.

At a certain moment, on the 10th day of September, the blind horse ran away and made direct for a quagmire, thirty or forty feet deep, and which skirted the road for some distance.

Nicholas wished to run after it! They withheld him. The horse, not being guided, precipitated itself and rider into the morass.

Nadia and Nicholas gave a fearful cry! They felt that their unhappy companion must have perished in that fall!

When they went to his relief, Michael Strogoff, having been able to throw himself out of the saddle, had received no wound, but the poor horse had both his legs broken and was no longer fit for use.

They left it to die there, without even putting it out of its misery, and Michael Strogoff, attached to the saddle of a Tartar, was compelled on foot to follow the detachment.

And not even yet a complaint; not any protestation! He walked with a rapid pace scarcely drawn by the cord with which he was tied. He was always "the man of iron," of whom General Kissoff had spoken to the Czar!

The next day, 11th of September, the detachment passed through the town of Chibarinskoe.

At that time an accident occurred which was to have very serious consequences.

The night had come. The Tartar horsemen, having had a halt, were more or less drunk. They were about to continue their journey.

Nadia, who up to that time, as though by a miracle, had been respected by those soldiers, was insulted by one of them.

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 pom-pom 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, then slung 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 IX.

MICHAEL STROGOFF and Nadia were once more free, as they had been during the journey from Perm to the banks of the Irtysh, but how changed were the circumstances of the journey. Then, a comfortable vehicle, teams often renewed, well-provided post-houses, secured for them a quick journey. Now, they were 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 four hundred versts! And, moreover, Michael Strogoff now only saw through the eyes of Nadia.

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

Michael Strogoff had thrown himself by the road side. Nadia, standing up, was waiting for

the word from him to again continue their weary march.

"It was ten 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."

"What do they want to do with our friend?" cried the young girl. "Poor Nicholas! Our meeting will be fatal to him!"

Michael Strogoff did not answer her. "Michael," continued Nadia, "do you not know that he has defended you when you were the sport of the Tartars, that he has risked his life for me?"

Michael Strogoff still continued silent. Immobile, his head resting on his hands, what were his thoughts! Well, if he did not answer her, did he even hear Nadia speaking to him?

Yes! he heard her, for, when the young girl added:

"To what place shall I lead you Michael?" "To Irkutsk!" he answered.

"By the high-road?" "Yes, Nadia."

Michael Strogoff still remained the man who had sworn to attain his end, cost what it might. To follow the high-road, was to go there by the shortest route. If the advance-guard of the troops of Feofar-Khan should appear, it would then be time to throw themselves on some by-road.

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

Next morning, 12th September, twenty versts farther, at the town of Toulounovska, he halted for a short time. The town was burnt down, and was deserted. During all the night, Nadia had sought to discover the dead body of Nicholas, thinking that it might have been abandoned on the road, but it was in vain that she searched the ruins, and looked among the dead. So far, Nicholas appeared to have been spared. But were they not reserving him for some cruel death, when he should arrive at the camp of Irkutsk?

Nadia worn out with hunger, from which her companion also suffered dreadfully, was happy enough to find in one of the houses of the town a certain quantity of dried meat and "soukharis," piece of bread, which, dried by evaporation, preserved indefinitely their nutritive qualities. Michael Strogoff and Nadia loaded themselves with as much as they could carry. Their nourishment was thus secured for several days, and, as regards water, that could not fail them in a country furrowed by a thousand little tributaries of the Angara.

And they continued their journey. Michael Strogoff walked along with a firm step, and never sickened except for his companion. Nadia, not wishing to remain behind, forced herself to march on. Happily, her companion could not see to what a miserable state fatigue had reduced her.

However, Michael Strogoff felt it. "You are at the end of your strength, poor child," he said to her sometimes.

"No," she answered. "When you cannot walk any farther, I will carry you, Nadia."

"Yes, Michael."

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

The sky was cloudy, the temperature supportable. They had reason to fear, however, that the weather would change to rain, and that would increase their misery. There were even a few showers, but they did not last.

Thus they kept going on, hand in hand, speaking little, Nadia ever and anon looking before and behind them. They had halted twice each day. They reposed six hours at night. In some cabins, Nadia again found a little of that mutton, so plentiful in that country that it only costs two kopecks the pound.

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 the never-ending steppe.

Traces of the third Tartar column, which was marching on Irkutsk, were not wanting. Here was a dead horse, there an abandoned wagon. The bodies of unfortunate Siberians marked out the road, especially at the entrance to the different villages. Nadia, conquering her repugnance, looked well at all the corpses!

In short the danger was not in front, it was behind them. The advance guard of the principal army of the Emir, which was led by Ivan Orareff, might make its appearance from one moment to the other. The boats forwarded from the lower Yenisei, must have arrived at Krasnoyarsk and been at once used for crossing the river. The road was then free for the invaders. No Russian corps could bar it between Krasnoyarsk and Lake Baikal. Michael Strogoff was thus expecting the arrival of Tartar scouts.

Likewise, at each halt, Nadia climbed some eminence and looked attentively toward the west, but no whirlwind of dust as yet signalled the appearance of a troop of horse. Then the march would be continued, and when Michael Strogoff felt that he was dragging along poor Nadia, he would walk with a less rapid pace. They spoke little, and only of Nicholas. The young girl kept repeating all that their companion of a few days had done for them.

In answering her, Michael Strogoff sought to give Nadia some hope, of which one could not have found any trace in him, for he knew well that the unfortunate man would not escape death.

One day, Michael Strogoff said to the young girl:

"You never speak to me of my mother, Nadia?"

"His mother!" Nadia had not wished to do so. Why should she renew all his grief? Was not the old Siberian dead? Had not her son given the last kiss to that corpse as it lay stretched on the plateau of Toomsk?"

"Speak to me of her, Nadia," said, however, Michael Strogoff. "Speak! You will give me pleasure!"

And then Nadia did what she had never done up to that time. Then she recounted to him all that had passed between Marfa and herself, from their meeting at Om-k, where they had seen each other for the first time. She told how an unexplainable instinct drew her towards the old Siberian without previously knowing her, what attention she had shown her, and what encouragement she had received from her. At that time Michael Strogoff was no more for her than Nicholas Korpanoff.

"What I ought always to have been!" answered Michael Strogoff, whose face became serious.

Then, a little later, he added:

"I have failed to keep my oath, Nadia. I had sworn not to see my mother?" "But you did not try to see her, Michael!" answered Nadia. "Chance alone brought you into her presence!" "I had sworn, whatever might happen, not to disclose myself!" "Michael, Michael! At the sight of the

lash raised over Marfa, could you resist? No! There is no oath which can hinder a son from succoring his mother!"

"I have broken my oath," Nadia, answered Michael Strogoff. "May God, my father, forgive me!"

"Michael," said the young girl, "I have a question to ask you. Do not answer me, if you believe that you ought not. Concerning yourself, nothing would wound me."

"Speak, Nadia."

"Why, now that the letter of the czar has been taken from you, are you in such a hurry to reach Irkutsk?"

Michael Strogoff clasped more firmly the hand of his companion, but he did not answer.

"Did you know the contents of that letter before leaving Moscow?" continued Nadia.

"No, I did not."

"Must I think, Michael, that the desire of restoring me safely to my father alone draws you to Irkutsk?"

"No, Nadia," answered gravely Michael Strogoff. "I should deceive you, were I to allow you to believe that such is the case. I go there because my duty bids me! As for conducting you to Irkutsk, are you not now rather leading me? Is it not by means of your eyes that I see? Is it not your hand which guides me? Have you not rendered me a hundred-fold the services which I was at first able to render to you? I do not know if fate will cease to crush us, but the day on which you will thank me for having restored you to the hands of your father, on that day I shall thank you for having conducted me to Irkutsk!"

"Poor Michael!" answered Nadia, with great emotion. "Do not speak thus! This is not the answer I ask from you. Michael, why, at present, are you so anxious to arrive at Irkutsk?"

"Because I must be there before Ivan Orareff!" cried Michael Strogoff.

"Even yet?"

"Even yet, and I shall be there!"

And in pronouncing these words, Michael Strogoff did not speak only through hatred of the traitor. But Nadia understood that her companion had not told her all, and that he could not tell her everything.

On the 15th of September, three days later, both reached the town of Kouitounskoe, which is sixty versts from Toulounovskae. The young girl could walk no longer without great pain. Her swollen feet could with difficulty support her. But she resisted, she strove against fatigue, and her only thought was this:

"Since he cannot see me, I shall go on until I fall!"

Besides, there was no obstacle on this portion of the route, nor even any danger since the departure of the Tartars. Only great fatigue.

And thus they walked on for three days. It could be seen that the third column of invaders was gaining rapidly eastward. They could see this from the ruins which they left behind, from the embers that had ceased to burn, from the already decomposed bodies that were lying on the ground.

Westward nothing could be seen; the advance-guard of the Emir did not make its appearance. Michael Strogoff, to explain this delay, formed the most unlikely suppositions. Did the Russians, in sufficient force, directly menace Toomsk or Krasnoyarsk? Would the third column, isolated from the other two, risk being cut off? If so, it would be easy for the grand duke to defend Irkutsk, and to gain time would be the means of repelling the invasion.

Michael Strogoff allowed himself at times to entertain these hopes, but soon he understood how chimerical they were, and he now only depended on himself, as if the safety of the grand duke were placed in his hands alone.

Sixty versts separated Kouitounskoe from Kimiteiskoe, a little town situated a short distance from the Dinka, a tributary of the Angara. Michael Strogoff could not reflect without apprehension on the obstacle which this somewhat important stream placed in his journey. Without any question it would be impossible to find any rafts or boats, and he remembered it was difficult to ford from having crossed it in happier times. But this stream once crossed, no river broke the road to Irkutsk, which was two hundred and thirty miles from that place.

They required no less than three days to reach Kimiteiskoe. Nadia began to creep slowly along. Whatever may have been the nature of her moral energy, physical strength was about to fail. Michael Strogoff knew it only too well.

Had he not been blind, without doubt Nadia would have said to him:

"Go, Michael, leave me in some hut! Reach Irkutsk! Accomplish your mission! See my father! Tell him where I am! Tell him I am waiting for him, and together you will know well where to find me! Set out at once! I have no fear! I will hide myself from the Tartars! I will preserve myself for him, for you! Go, Michael! I cannot go any farther!"

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 ten o'clock at night, both reached at length Kimiteiskoe. From the top of the hill Nadia perceived a line a little less dark on the horizon. It was the Dinka.

Some flashes of lightning were reflected in its waters, flashes without thunder, which at times lit up the distant country.

Nadia conducted her companion through the ruined town. The ashes left from the different fires were now cold. It must have been five or six days since the last Tartars had passed through.

Having come to the last houses of the town, Nadia allowed herself to fall on a stone seat.

"Do we halt now?" Michael Strogoff asked her.

"Night has come, Michael," answered Nadia. "Do you wish to rest a few hours?" "I would have liked to pass the Dinka," answered Michael Strogoff. "I could have wished to place it between us and the advance-guard of the enemy. But you cannot drag yourself any further, my poor Nadia."

"Come Michael," answered Nadia, who seized the hand of her companion and drew him along.

It was at a distance of two or three versts from there that the Dinka cut the road to Irkutsk. The young girl wished to make that last effort which her companion asked from her. They marched along the road, which was lit up by flashes of lightning. They were then traversing a desert without boundaries, in the middle of which the little river lost itself. Not a tree, not a hillock, rose on this vast plain, which was a continuation of the great Siberian steppe. Not a breath of wind stirred the air, whose calmness caused the least sound to be heard at a very great distance.

Suddenly Michael Strogoff and Nadia 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, afterwards, 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, lit up with flashes of lightning in rapid succession, but she saw nothing.

And yet a voice came again, which 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 Michael! Where was he? Nadia had not even the strength to call out to him.

Michael Strogoff, lying down 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 beast, 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 there die of hunger and thirst, and perhaps 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, living 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 success, 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 clay knife to release from it that imprisoned body.

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

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He recognized Michael and Nadia. Then! "Adieu, friends," he murmured, "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 a half verst away.

Michael Strogoff listened.

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

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

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