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THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

This answer was characteristic

Nicholas Pigassof. However, the kibitka kept on its easy ourse, which Michael Strogoff would have liked to render more rapid, but Nicholas and his horse were accustomed to a gait from which neither the one nor the other could depart. The horse walked for three hours and then rested for one, and this day and night. During the halts the horse pastured, the travelers of the kibitka ate in company with the faithful Serko. The kiwas provisioned for at least twenty persons, and Nicholas had generously placed the reserved food at the disposal of his two guests, whom he believed to be brother and sister.

On the 22d of August the kibitks reached the town of Atchinsk, which was 380 versts from Tomsk. A hundred and twenty versts still separated it from Krasnoiarsk. No incident had marked this journey. During the six days they had been together Nicholas, Michael Strogoff and Nadia had remained just the same, the one in his unalterable calmness, the other two anxious and looking forward to the moment when their companion would

separate from them. On the evening of the 25th of August the kilitka was only half a verst from Krasnejarsk. One could see on the right and left the numerous wooden which are erected along the road at the approaches to the town. It was 7 o'clock at night.

The tibitka had stopped. "Where are we, sister?" asked Michael strogoff.

"A little over a half verst from the first houses," answered Nadia. "Has the town, then, gone to sleep!

No nose strikes upon my ear." Ten minutes afterward the kibitks entered the principal street.

Kraspolarsk was deserted! There was not any longer an Athenian in this "Atheis of the North," as it is called by Mae. de Bourboulon. Not one of those equipages, so splendidly rigged out, rittled along the handsome wide streets Not a foot passenger trod the sidewaks that skirted those magnificent houses of wood, palatial in their grander!

Not a living soul remained in Kras-

Michael Strogoff, Nadia and Nicholas had not to search long for a place in which to rest. The first house of which they tied the door was empty, as were someting better, the horse had to be content with this meager food. As for the privisions of the kibitka, they were not emausted, and each one took his share. Then, after having knelt before a modest picture of the Panaghia was hanging on the wall and which the last flame of a lamp still lit up, Ncholas and the young girl fell asleed while Michael Strogoff remained awake, his anxiety driving away

all sleep. The next day, 26th of August, before daybeak the kibitka was traversing the pirk of birch trees to reach the banks of the Yenisei, which was crossed by the little party on an improvised

Miciael Strogoff could at length believe that the route was free as far as Irkuta. He had outstripped the Tard when the soldiers of the emir arrive at Krasnolarsk they only find an abandoned town there and no means of immediate communication between the two banks of isel; hence a delay of some days bridge of boats, difficult to con-

should open a passage to them. For the first time since the unlucky meeting with Ivan Ogareff at Omsk the corrier of the czar felt himself less uneas and could hope that no new obstale would arise to the accomplishment of his plans.

The kibitka, after having proceeded fifteen versts toward the southeast, came to and retook the long highroad cross the steppe.

the 28th of August the travelers assed the town of Balaisk, which eighty versts from Krasnojarsk. was and by the 29th that of Ribinsk, forty

versa from Balaisk. next day, after traveling more than thirty-five versts, they arrived at Kansk, a more considerable town, waby the river of the same name, a small affluent of the Yenisei, which nds from the mountains of Se-

yans On going out from Kamsk Michael ed Nadia and Nicholas that they d find only one little town of some rtance, Nijni Oudinsk, before Ir-. Nicholas answered that he knew that there was a telegraphic stan that town. Therefore if Nijni Oudnsk had been abandoned like Kansk he would certainly be obliged nsk had been abandoned like

to sek for some occupation in the cap-ita of eastern Siberia.

From Kamsk to the neighboring to very long, about a hundred and

After having crossed the little river of Birlousa the kibitka reached Birlousirsk on the morning of the 4th of Sep-tember. There, very fortunately, Nichols, who saw his provisions becoming expausted, found in an abandoned bakea dozen cakes, prepared with matton fat, and a large supply of boil-

After a reasonable halt they contin ued their journey once more on the afternoon of the Sth of September. The distance to Irkutsk was not more than 500 versts. Nothing in their rear signaled the advance guard of the Tartars. Michael Strogoff had therefore settled down to think that his journey would not again be interrupted and that in eight days or in ten at the most he would be in the presence of the

In coming out of Biriousinsk a hare rossed the road about thirty paces in front of the kibitka. "Ah!" said Nicholas

"What is the matter, friend?" asked Michael Strogoff eagerly, as a blind man whom the least noise held on the

whose smiling face suddenly became cloudy.

Then he added "Ah, no, you could not see, and it is happy for you, good father!" "But I have seen nothing," said Na

"So much the better! So much the better! But I-I have seen!" "What was it, then?" asked Michael

"A hare that came across our path!"

answered Nicholas. In Russia when a hare crosses the path of a traveler popular belief looks upon it as a sign of approaching evil. Nicholas, superstitious as are the greater part of the Russians, had stopped the kibitka.

Michael Strogoff understood the hesitation of his companion, although he did not share his credulity regarding hares crossing the path, and he wished to reassure bim.

"We have nothing to fear, friend," he said to him. "Nothing for you nor for her, I know,

good father," answered Nicholas, "but for me!" And, continuing, said he:

"It is my destiny." And he again put his horse to the

Meanwhile, in spite of the sad prognostications, the day passed by without any accident.

Next day, Sept. 9, at noon the kibitka halted at the town of Alsalevsk, as deserted as was the surrounding country. There on the threshold of a house Nadia found two of those knives with but a heap of leaves. For want of hunters. She gave one of them to Michael Strogoff, who hid it under his coat, and she kept the other for herself. The kibitka was not more than

sixty-five versts from Nijni Oudinsk. Nicholas during the last two days had not been able to regain his usual good humor. The evil emen had affected him more than one could have believed, and he who up to that time had never remained an hour without talking had now long spells of silence, from which even Nadia could with difficulty

withdraw him. In spite of all his somewhat fatalistic resignation he would not believe himself safe except within the walls of Irkutsk. Many Russians would have thought like Nicholas, and more than one, pulling the bridle of his horse, would have turned back after seeing a

hare cross their path. The next day, toward 4 o'clock in the afternoon, Nicholas descried on the horizon the high belfries 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 if 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 verst was made. 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,

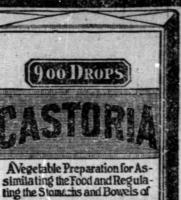
struck in the head, fell dead. At the same instant, a dozen horse men threw themselves on the road, and the kibitka was surrounded. Michael Strogoff, Nadia and Nicholas, without having had time to recover themselves, were prisoners and being led rapidly toward Nijni Oudinsk.

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

At that time an incident occurred which was to have very serious conse-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

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