

Michael Strogoff,

THE COURIER OF THE CAZAR.

By Jules Verne.

PART II.

CHAPTER VI.—CONTINUED.

"There remain to me still a few roubles and my eyes! I can look after you, Michael, and lead you to where you could not go alone."

"And how shall we go?"

"On foot."

"By begging."

"Let us set out, Nadia."

"Come, Michael."

The two young folks did not give themselves any longer the name of brother and sister. In their common misery they felt themselves more closely united to each other.

Both left the house, after having taken an hour's repose. Nadia, in passing along the streets of the town, had procured some morsels of "tchornokhle", a sort of bread, made of barley, and a little of that mixture of water and honey, known in Russia by the name of "meed."

These had cost her no trifling sum, for she had commenced her profession of a beggar. This bread and hydro-mel, bad as it was, appeased the hunger and thirst of Michael Strogoff. Nadia had kept for him the greater portion of the scanty food. He ate the morsels of bread which his companion handed to him one after another. He drank from the gourd which his companion raised to his lips.

"Do you eat, Nadia?" he asked her several times.

"Yes, Michael," answered always the young girl, who contented herself with the leavings of her companion.

Michael and Nadia quitted Semilowskoe and retraced the wearying road for Irkutsk. The young girl energetically resisted the fatigue. If Michael had seen her, perhaps he would not have had the courage to go any further.

But Nadia did not complain, and Michael Strogoff did not bemoan even a sigh, walked with a speed which he could not repeat.

"And why? (Could he still hope to outstrip the Tartars? He was on foot, without money; he was blind, and if Nadia, his only guide, should fall from him, he would only lie down by the roadside, and there miserably perish! But then, if, by the strength of energy, he should reach Krasnoarsk, all was, perhaps, not lost, since the governor, to whom he would make himself known, would not hesitate to give him the means of gaining Irkutsk.)"

Michael Strogoff, therefore, went along, speaking little, absorbed in his own thoughts. He kept hold of Nadia's hand. Both were in constant communication with each other. It seemed to them that they had no longer need of words to exchange their thoughts. From time to time, Michael Strogoff said:

"Speak to me, Nadia."

"What is the good, Michael; we are thinking together!" replied the young girl, and she spoke in such a tone that her voice did not disclose any fatigue. But sometimes, as if her heart had ceased to beat for an instant, her legs bent, her step became slower, her arm stretched out, she remained a little behind. Michael Strogoff would then stop, and would fix his eyes on the poor girl, as though he would try to perceive her through the dark shadow which he carried with him. His heart was full; sustaining still more his companion, he advanced on his journey.

However, in the midst of these miseries, without trace, a happy circumstance occurred, which was to lessen the fatigues of both of them.

They had left Semilowskoe about two hours, when Michael Strogoff stopped.

"Is the road deserted?" he asked.

"Without a soul on it," replied Nadia.

"Do you not hear some noise behind?"

"Truly."

"If these are the Tartars, we must hide ourselves. Look well."

"Listen, Michael!" replied Nadia ascending the road which diverged some paces to the right.

Michael Strogoff stopped an instant alone, stretching his ears to listen.

Nadia returned almost immediately and said:

"It's a vehicle. A young man is leading it."

"He is alone?"

"Alone."

Michael Strogoff hesitated for a moment. Ought he to hide? Or ought he, on the contrary, try the chance of finding a place in this vehicle, if not for himself, at least for her? For himself, he would be content to rest his hand on it, and would push when needed, for his legs were far from falling him, but he felt that Nadia, dragged on foot since the passage of the Oul, namely, for more than eight days, was at the end of her strength.

He waited. The vehicle arrived soon at the turn of the road.

It was a very dilapidated vehicle, able to hold at least three persons, what is called in that country a kibitka.

The kibitka is usually drawn by three horses, but this one was drawn only by one horse, with long hair and a long tail, but its Mongolian blood affirmed strength and courage.

A young man conducted it, having near him a dog.

Nadia at once saw that this young man was a Bashkir. He had a sweet and phlegmatic appearance which inspired confidence.

Moreover, he did not appear to be in the least hurry. He walked with a quiet step, in order not to overdrive his horse, and, to see him one could never have believed that he was following a route which the Tartars might cut off at any moment.

Nadia, holding the hand of Michael Strogoff, stood on one side.

The kibitka stopped, and the driver looked at the young girl, at the same time smiling.

"And where are you going in this fashion?" he asked her, as he looked pleasantly round.

At the sound of this voice, Michael Strogoff said to himself that he had heard it somewhere; and without doubt it was sufficient to cause him to recognize the driver of the kibitka, for his face at once became serene.

"Well, now, where are you going?" repeated the young man, addressing himself more directly to Michael Strogoff.

"We are going to Irkutsk," answered the latter.

"Oh! my good man, do you not know then that there are many, many versts between this and Irkutsk?"

"I know it."

"And you are going on foot?"

"As for you, it's all right! but the Miss?"

"She is my sister," said Michael Strogoff, who thought it more prudent to give this name again to Nadia.

"Yes, your sister, my good man! But believe me she will never be able to reach Irkutsk!"

"Friend," replied Michael Strogoff, as he drew near, "the Tartars have robbed us, and I

have not a kopeck to offer thee, but if you will take my sister near you, I will follow the cart (she on foot, I will run if it be necessary, and I will not delay you one hour."

"Brother," cried Nadia, "I do not wish it; I do not wish it, my brother, is blind!"

"Blind!" said the young man in a voice moved with emotion.

"The Tartars have burned out her eyes!" answered Nadia, stretching out her hands as though to implore pity.

"Burned your eyes? Oh! poor, dear man! I am going to Krasnoarsk. Well now, why do you not mount with your sister into the kibitka? In sitting a little closer, we shall hold each other up. Besides, my dog will not refuse to go on foot. Only I do not go fast, in order to spare my horse."

"Friend, what do they call you?" asked Michael Strogoff.

"I am called Nicholas Pigassoff."

"It is a name that I shall never forget," answered Michael Strogoff.

"Well then, mount, my good blind man. Your sister shall be near you, at the back of the cart, I mean, to conduct. There is some good birch bark and some barley straw on the bottom. It's like a nest. Come, Serko, give us room!"

The dog jumped off without much asking. It was an animal of the Siberian breed, with a grey hide, medium size, with a good large and curving head, and which appeared to be very attached to his master.

Michael Strogoff and Nadia, in an instant were installed in the kibitka. Michael Strogoff had stretched out his hands as though to search those of Nicholas Pigassoff.

"Is it my hands you wish to press?" said Nicholas. Here they are, my good man! Shake them as much as you like!"

The kibitka was soon in motion. The horse, which Nicholas never struck, ambled along. If Michael Strogoff did not gain much in rapidity, at least new fatigues would be spared to Nadia. And such was the exhaustion of the young girl that, rocked by the monotonous motion of the kibitka, she soon fell into a sleep resembling an utter prostration.

Michael Strogoff and Nicholas made a bed for her on the birch leaves as well as they were able. The compassionate young man was much moved, and if a tear did not escape the eyes of Michael Strogoff in truth, it was because the red-hot iron had burned them dry!

"She is pretty," said Nicholas.

"Yes," answered Michael Strogoff.

"These dealings would be strong, for they are courageous, but they are really only weak. Do you come a great distance?"

"From a great distance."

"Poor young folks! It must have hurt you much when they burned your eyes!"

"Very much," said Michael Strogoff, turning as though he could see Nicholas.

"Did you not cry?"

"Yes."

"I also should have cried. To think that one can never see again those they love! Anyhow, they see you. That is perhaps some consolation!"

"Yes, perhaps!"

"Tell me, friend," demanded Michael Strogoff, "have you never seen me anywhere before to day?"

"You, my good man? No, never."

"It is because the sound of your voice is not unknown to me."

"Do you see?" said Nicholas, smiling. "He knows the sound of my voice! Perhaps you ask me this to learn whence I come. Oh! I am going to tell you. I am coming from Kolyvan."

"From Kolyvan?" said Michael Strogoff.

"Well then, it is there that I met you. You were at the telegraph office?"

"That may be," answered Nicholas. "I lived there. I was employed as message clerk."

"And you remained at your post to the last moment?"

"Oh! it is especially at that moment one ought to be there!"

"It was the day when the Englishman and a Frenchman, roubles in their hands, disputed the turn at your wicket, and when the Englishman telegraphed the first verses of the Bible?"

"That my good man, but I do not remember."

"What! you do not remember it?"

"I never read the despatches which I transmit. My duty being to forget them, the shortest way is to be ignorant of them."

This answer was characteristic of Nicholas Pigassoff.

However, the kibitka kept on its easy course 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 kibitka was 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.

After one day of repose, Nadia had recovered part of her strength. Nicholas took all the care of her he could. The journey was being made under supportable circumstances, slowly without doubt, but regularly. It often fortunately happened during the night, Nicholas, while conducting, fell asleep, and awoke with a conviction that bore witness of the calm of his conscience. Perhaps then, on looking well, one could have seen the hand of Michael Strogoff seeking the reins of the horse and making him take a faster step, to the great astonishment of Serko, who nevertheless said nothing! Then, this trot changed immediately into the old amble, from the moment Nicholas awoke, but the kibitka had not the less gained several versts on its regular speed.

It was thus they passed the river Ichim, the town of Ichim, Kusko, the river Marusk, the town of the same name, Bigotowskoe, and lastly the Tchoula, a little water course which separates Western from Eastern Siberia. The route sometimes crossed immense lands, which left a vast field before the sight, sometimes under thick and interminable forests of fir, from which they thought they would never come forth.

All was a desert. The towns were almost entirely abandoned. The peasants had fled across the Yenisei, thinking that this wide river would perhaps arrest the Tartars.

On the 22nd of August the kibitka reached the town of Atchinsk, which was three hundred and eighty versts from Tomsk. A hundred and twenty versts still separated it from Krasnoarsk. 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.

Michael Strogoff, it may be said, saw the country traversed by the eyes of Nicholas and the young girl. In turns, each pointed to him the scenes through which the kibitka was passing. He knew when he was in the forest or on the plain; some hut arose on the solitary steppes, if some Siberian appeared on the horizon, Nicholas was never exhausted. He loved to talk, and such was his pleasant way

of falling anything, that one asked to listen to him.

One day Michael Strogoff asked him what kind of weather it was.

"Pretty fine, my good man," he answered. "It is these are the last days of summer. The autumn is short in Siberia, and soon we shall have the first colds of winter. Perhaps the Tartars are thinking of going into winter quarters during the bad season?"

"Michael Strogoff shook his head with an air of doubt.

"You do not believe it, my good man," said Nicholas. "Do you think they will march on Irkutsk?"

"I fear it," answered Michael Strogoff.

"Yes; you are right. They have with them a bad man, who will not allow them to cool down on the road. You have spoken of Ivan Ogareff?"

"Yes."

"Do you know, it is not a good thing to betray one's country?"

"No; it is not a good thing," answered Michael Strogoff, who wished to remain impassive.

"My good man," continued Nicholas, "I see you are not sufficiently indignant when spoken to concerning Ivan Ogareff! Every Russian heart should leap when that name is pronounced!"

"Believe me, friend, I hate him more than you can ever hate him," said Michael Strogoff.

"That is not possible," replied Nicholas; "no, that is not possible. When I think of Ivan Ogareff, of the injury he has done our sacred Russia, I am seized with anger, and if I held him—"

"If you held him, friend?"

"I believe I would kill him."

"As former, I am sure of it," tranquilly answered Michael Strogoff.

CHAPTER VII.

On the evening of the 25th of August, the kibitka arrived in sight of Krasnoarsk. The journey from Tomsk had taken eight days. If it had not been accomplished more rapidly, in spite of what Michael Strogoff was able to do, it was because Nicholas slept little. Hence, the impossibility of increasing the speed of the horse, which, in other hands, would have finished the journey in sixty hours.

Very fortunately, there was no longer any question of the Tartars. No scout had appeared on the route followed by the kibitka. That appeared somewhat inexplicable, for it must have been some grave circumstance that could prevent the troops of the Emir from marching at once upon Irkutsk.

And that circumstance had in reality occurred. A new Russian corps, assembled in all haste in the government of Yenisei, had marched on Tomsk to attempt its recapture. But, too weak against the now concentrated troops of the Emir, it had been obliged to retreat. Fear-Khan, including his own soldiers and those of the khans of Khokhand and Koundouza, had under his orders over two hundred and fifty thousand men, against whom the Russian government could not as yet oppose sufficient force.

The battle of Tomsk took place on the 22d of August, of which battle of course Michael Strogoff had not heard—but this explained why the advance-guard of the Emir had not as yet appeared at Krasnoarsk, by the 24th.

However, if Michael Strogoff could not know the last events that had happened after his departure, he knew at least this: that if he should be several days in advance of the Tartars, he could hope to reach before them the town of Irkutsk, which was still distant some eight hundred and fifty versts.

Besides, at Krasnoarsk, the population of which is about twelve thousand souls, he felt sure that the means of transportation would not fail him. Since Nicholas Pigassoff had to stop at that town, it would be necessary to replace him with a guide, and to change the kibitka for a more rapid vehicle. Michael Strogoff, after having addressed himself to the governor of the town, and after having established his identity and his quality as courier of the Czar—a thing which would be easy of accomplishment—did not doubt he would be enabled to reach Irkutsk with the shortest delay. He would then have nothing to do but thank his brave Nicholas, and set out immediately with Nadia, for he did not intend to leave her until he had restored her to the arms of her father. However, if Nicholas had resolved to stop at Krasnoarsk, it was, as he said, on condition that he could find employment there.

In reality, this model servant, after having held to the last minute his post at Kolyvan, was seeking to regain place himself at the disposition of the administration.

"Why should I touch appointments which I have not merited?" he repeated. Besides, in case his services are not required at Krasnoarsk, which had to be kept always in telegraphic communication with Irkutsk, he proposed to go either to the post of Oudinsk, or as far as the capital of Siberia. Then, in that case, he would continue his journey with the brother and sister, and in whom would they find a more sure guide, a more devoted friend?

The kibitka was only half a verst from Krasnoarsk, one could see on the right and left the numerous wooden crosses which are erected along the road at the approaches to the town. It was seven o'clock at night.

The kibitka 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 noise strikes upon my ear."

"And I do not see any light shining in the darkness, or any smoke rising in the air," added Nadia.

"What a queer town!" said Nicholas. "They do not make any noise here, and they go to bed in good time!"

Michael Strogoff's mind was troubled with a presentiment of every agony. He had not told Nadia that he had concentrated his hopes on Krasnoarsk, where he counted on finding the means of securely accomplishing his journey. But Nadia had divined his thought, although she did not understand why her companion was in such a hurry to reach Irkutsk, now that he had not the imperial letter.

One day she even pressed him on this matter.

"I have sworn to go to Irkutsk," was his only reply.

But to accomplish his mission, it was still necessary he should find some rapid means of locomotion.

"Well, my friend," said he to Nicholas, "why do we not go forward?"

"Because I am afraid of waking the inhabitants of the town with the noise of my conveyance."

And with a light lash from his whip, he stirred up his horse. Serko gave a few barks, and the kibitka descended at a little trot the hill leading into Krasnoarsk.

Ten minutes afterwards it entered the principal street.

Krasnoarsk was deserted! There was not any longer an Athenian in this "Athens in the North," as it is called by Mme. de Bourboulon. Not one of those equipages, so splendidly

rigged-out, rattled along the handsome wide streets. Not a foot passenger trod the sidewalks that skirted those magnificent houses of wood—palatial in their grandeur!

Not one elegant Siberian lady, dressed in the latest fashions from France, was taking a walk in that splendid park, out in a forest of birch-trees, which stretches as far as the steep banks of the Yenisei. The big bell of the cathedral was mute, the chimneys of so many churches were silent, and yet it is very rare that a Russian town is not filled with the sound of its bells. But here was a complete desertion! There was not a living soul in the town!

The last telegram sent by the cabinet of the czar, before the wires were cut, had commanded the governor, the garrison, and the inhabitants, to abandon Krasnoarsk, to carry away with them every object of value, or which could be of any use to the Tartars, and to seek refuge in Irkutsk. The same orders had been sent to the inhabitants of all the towns of the province. The Muscovite government wished to make a desert for the invaders. These peremptory orders no one for a moment thought of questioning. They were at once carried out, and this was the reason that not a living soul remained in Krasnoarsk.

Michael Strogoff, Nadia, and Nicholas, passed in silence through the streets of the town. A strange feeling came over them. They produced the only sound that was heard in that dead city. Michael Strogoff did not allow any signs of discouragement to appear, nevertheless, he felt keenly his bad luck at being deceived once more in his hopes.

"Good God!" cried Nicholas, "I shall never obtain my appointments in this desert!"

"Friend," said Nadia, "you must continue with us the journey to Irkutsk."

"I must, in truth," answered Nicholas.

"The wires will be still in operation between Oudinsk and Irkutsk, and there—"

"Shall we start, good father?"

"Let us wait until to-morrow," answered Michael Strogoff.

"You are right," answered Nicholas. "We have to cross the Yenisei, and it is necessary to see there—"

"To see there!" murmured Nadia, as she thought of her blind companion.

Nicholas had understood her, and turning to Michael Strogoff,

"Pardon, good father," said he. "Alas! night and day is all one for you!"

"Do not reproach yourself, friend," answered Michael Strogoff, as he passed his hand before his eyes. "With you for guide, I can still act. Take then, a few hours' rest. Let Nadia also repose. To-morrow we shall have daylight!"

Michael Strogoff, Nadia and Nicholas, had not to search long for a place in which to rest. The first house of which they tried the door was empty, as were all the rest. They found nothing there but a heap of leaves. For want of something better, the horse had to be content with this meagre food. As for the provisions of the kibitka, they were not exhausted, and each one took his share. Then, after having knelt before a modest picture of the Panagia that was hanging on the wall, and which the last flame of a lamp still lit up, Nicholas and the young girl fell asleep, while Michael Strogoff remained awake, his anxiety driving away all sleep.

The next day, the 26 of August, before day-break, the kibitka was traversing the park of birch trees to reach the banks of the Yenisei. Michael Strogoff was greatly pre-occupied. How could they cross the river, if, as was probable, every bark and ferry-boat had been destroyed in order to retard the march of the Tartars.

He knew well the Yenisei, having crossed over it several times. He knew that its breadth is considerable, that the rapids are violent in the double bed which it has scooped out between the islands. Under ordinary circumstances, by means of those ferry-boats, specially established for travelers, the passage of the Yenisei requires three hours, and it is only with the greatest exertion that these ferry-boats gain its right bank. Now, in the absence of every means of transport, how could the kibitka be crossed from the one bank to the other?

"I shall cross it, though!" repeated Michael Strogoff. This day began to dawn when the kibitka arrived on the left bank at the termination of one of the principal avenues of the park. At this spot the banks are a hundred feet high, overlook the course of the Yenisei. Hence, the vast extent of it is presented to the view.

"Do you see any ferry-boat?" asked Michael Strogoff, while eagerly stretching his eyes from one side to the other, no doubt by a mechanical habit, as if he himself could see.

"We have as yet scarcely daylight, brother," answered Nadia. "The fog is still thick on the river, and we cannot, as yet, well distinguish the waters."

"But I hear their roar," replied Michael Strogoff.

"Yes," assented Nicholas, "we can hear their roar indeed. Soon we shall see the waters and the rocks that make all this growling!"

And, in fact, there came from the lower beds of this mist a deafening roar of currents and counter-currents rushing against each other. The waters, very high at this season of the year, ran with the violence of a torrent.

All the three listened, waiting till the curtain of the mist should rise.

The sun rose quickly above the horizon, and its first rays were not long in dispelling these vapors.

"Well, then?" asked Michael Strogoff.

"The mists begin to roll away, brother, daylight has already penetrated them."

"You did not see as yet the level of the river, sister?"

"Not as yet."

"Look sharply for a boat or raft on the river, as quickly as the fog disappears," said Michael Strogoff.

"A little patience, good father," said Nicholas. "All this will disappear. Well, now, here comes the wind! It begins to dispel the fog. The high hills of the right bank already show their roofs of trees. All goes away! All flies away! The good mys of the sun have condensed the expanse of mist. Ah! how beautiful it is, my poor blind man, and what a misfortune for you not to be able to contemplate such a sight!"

"Do you see a boat?" asked Michael Strogoff.

"I do not see any," answered Nicholas.

"Look well, friend, along this and the opposite bank, as far as your eye can reach. A boat, a raft, a bark canoe!"

"No," said Nicholas, "I see nothing."

"Look again, Nadia," said Michael Strogoff to the young girl. "Your eyes are sharp; search the shore up and down, look into every bay and indentation. We must find a boat or raft of some description!"

Nadia shaded her eyes with her hand, as if to concentrate her vision, and searched the river long and earnestly.

"But not a sign of either boat or raft!"

"No, brother," she at length said sadly, "I see nothing."

Michael Strogoff made no reply, but he could not restrain a single sigh that expressed his deep disappointment.

Nicholas and Nadia, holding on by the last birch-tree of the cliff, perched themselves far over the river. The Yenisei, at this place, is at least a verst and a half across and forms two arms of unequal importance, which the waters follow with rapidity.

Between these arms nestled several islands, planted with alders, willows, and poplars, which resemble so many green vessels anchored in the river. Beyond rose in succession the high hills on the eastern bank, crowned with forests whose tops were em-purpled with the morning light.

Up and down the river, the Yenisei seemed to flee.

Ah, if the fugitives could only fly with the speed of these rushing waters!

But not a single craft, neither on the left bank nor on the right bank, nor along the shores of the island. All had been taken away or destroyed by order. Most certainly, if the Tartars should not bring from the south the materials necessary for the forming of a bridge of boats, their march upon