

Michael Strogoff,

THE COURIER OF THE CZAR.

By Jules Verne.

PART II. CHAPTER XI.—CONTINUED.

Ten minutes afterwards the lower border of the barrier was reached. There the waters of the Angara again became free. A few large blocks of ice, becoming by degrees detached from the field, and floating with the current, descended towards the town.

Nadia understood what Michael Strogoff wished to attempt. She saw one of those blocks of ice that was only held by a narrow tongue.

"Come," said Nadia. "And both lay down on this morsel of ice, which a slight rocking loosened from the barrier."

The block began to make its way down the river. The river itself became wider, and the route was free.

Michael Strogoff and Nadia could hear the firing of guns, the cries of distress, the shouts of the Tartars that made themselves heard up the river. Then little by little those cries of deep anguish and of ferocious joy were lost in the distance.

"Oh! those poor companions!" whispered Nadia.

For half an hour the current quickly carried along the block of ice which was bearing Michael Strogoff and Nadia. At every moment they feared that they might sink under the water. Being caught in the stream, it followed the middle of the river, and it would not be necessary to give it an oblique direction until there was question of making for the quays of Irkutsk.

Michael Strogoff, with his teeth set, and his ears ready to catch the least sound, did not utter a single word. Never was he so near attaining his end. He felt that he was about to succeed!

Towards two o'clock in the morning, a double row of lights lit up the sombre horizon on the two banks of the Angara.

On the right was the glare from the lights of Irkutsk. On the left the fires of the Tartar camp.

Michael Strogoff was not more than half a verst from the city.

"At last!" whispered he.

But, suddenly, Nadia gave a cry.

"At that cry, Michael Strogoff rose up from the block, which became very unsteady. His hand stretched out toward the head of the Angara. His face, all lit up with the reflection of blue lights, became terrible to look at, and then, as though his eyes had been reopened to the light:

"Ah!" cried he, "God himself is against us!"

CHAPTER XII.

IRKUTSK, capital of Eastern Siberia, has, in ordinary times, a population of thirty thousand souls. A high hill of solid rock, skirting the right bank of the Angara, serves as a splendid position for its churches, crowned by a high cathedral, and for its houses, built in picturesque order along its slopes.

Seen from a certain distance, from the top of the mountain which runs along the great Siberian route at a distance of some twenty versts, with its domes and bell-towers, its graceful spires, like those of minarets, its spiral domes, it has a somewhat Oriental appearance. But that Oriental appearance vanishes from the eyes of the traveler from the moment he enters the town. The town, half Byzantine, half Chinese, becomes more European by its macadamized streets, bordered with sidewalks, with their rows of gigantic birch trees and its brick and wooden houses, some of which have several stories, by its many splendid edifices, in fine, by the whole body of its inhabitants being very advanced in the progress of civilization, and to which the latest fashions of Paris are not at all strangers.

At that epoch Irkutsk, refuge for the Siberians of the province, was crowded. It abandoned in resources of every kind. Irkutsk is the emporium for all that countless merchandise which is exchanged between China, Central Asia, and Europe. They did not fear to draw there the peasants from the valley of the Angara, the Mongol-Khalkas, people from Toungouze and Bouri, and to allow the wilderness to stretch out between the invaders and the town.

Irkutsk is the residence of the governor-general of Eastern Siberia. Under him is a civil governor, in whose hands is concentrated the administration of the province, a head of the police, who has a great deal to do in a town where exiles abound, and lastly, a mayor, one of the leading merchants, an important personage by his immense fortune, and by the influence which he has over his fellow-citizens.

The garrison of Irkutsk was then composed of a regiment of foot Cossacks, which numbered about two thousand men, a body of foot "gendarmes," who wore the helmet and blue uniforms striped with silver.

Besides, it is known that on account of particular circumstances, the brother of the czar had been shut up in the town since the commencement of the invasion.

That situation must be given in detail. It was a journey of political importance that had led the grand duke into those distant provinces of Eastern Asia.

The grand duke, after having visited the principal cities of Siberia, traveling in military rather than princely style, without any retinue, escorted by a detachment of Cossacks, had gone even as far as the mountains beyond the Balkan mountains. Nicolaeveak, the last Russian town which is situated on the shores of the sea of Okhotsk, had been honored by his visit.

Having reached the boundaries of the immense Muscovite empire, the grand duke was returning to Irkutsk, from whence he would soon return to Europe, when the news reached him of that invasion, which was as sudden as a lightning-bolt. He hastened to re-enter the capital, but when he arrived there, communication with Russia had been cut off.

He still received a few telegrams from Petersburg and Moscow he could even answer them. Afterwards, the wire was cut under the circumstances already known to the reader.

Irkutsk was isolated from the rest of the world.

The grand duke could do nothing but organize resistance, a thing which he did with that firmness and coolness of which he had given, under other circumstances, incontestable proofs.

News of the taking of Ichim, of Omsk, of Tomsk, came successively to Irkutsk. They could not count on being soon relieved, but they must prevent, at all prices, the occupation of the capital of Siberia. The few troops scattered over the province of Amour, and those in the government of Irkutsk, could not arrive in sufficient numbers to arrest the

Tartar columns. Besides, since Irkutsk could not possibly escape being invested, it was of the utmost importance to put the town in a position to sustain a siege of some length.

Those works were begun on the day on which Tomsk fell into the hands of the Tartars. At the same time as that last news the grand duke learned that the emir of Bokhara and the allied khans were directing the movement in person, but what he did not know, was that the lieutenant of those barbarous chiefs was Ivan Ogareff, a Russian officer whom he himself had cashiered.

From the first, as has been seen, the inhabitants of the province of Irkutsk had been ordered to abandon the towns and villages. Those who did not seek refuge in the capital were compelled to retire beyond Lake Baikal, to where the invasion would not likely extend its ravages. The crops of corn and forage were requisitioned for the town, and that last rampart of Russian power in the extreme east was prepared to resist for some time.

Irkutsk, founded in 1611, is situated at the confluence of the Irkut and the Angara, on the right bank of the river. Two wooden bridges built on piles, and so arranged as to open the whole width of the river for the necessities of navigation, joined the town with its outskirts which extended along the left bank. The outskirts were abandoned, bridges destroyed. The passage of the Angara, which was very wide at that place, would not have been possible under the fire of the besieged. But the river could be crossed either above or below the town, and, as a consequence, Irkutsk was in danger of being attacked on the east side, which no rampart protected.

It was, then, in works of fortification that the hands were first employed. They worked day and night. The grand duke found a spirited population in supplying that need, and afterwards he found them most brave in its defense. Soldiers, merchants, exiles, peasants, all devoted themselves to the common safety. Eight days before the Tartars had appeared on the Angara, ramparts of earth had been raised. A moat, flooded with the waters of the Angara, had been dug between the inner and outer wall of the fortification. The city could no longer be taken by a sudden assault. It must be invested and besieged.

The third Tartar column—that which had ascended the valley of the Yenisei—appeared in sight of Irkutsk on the 21st day of September. It immediately occupied the abandoned outskirts, of which the very houses had been destroyed in order not to impede the action of the arch duke's artillery, which was unfortunately very insufficient.

The Tartars organized themselves while waiting the arrival of the two other columns, which were commanded by the emir and his allies.

The junction of these divers corps took place on the 25th of September, at the camp of Angara, and all the army, except the garrisons left in the principal conquered towns was concentrated under the orders of Keofar-Khan.

The passage of the Angara having been regarded by Ivan Ogareff as impracticable before Irkutsk, a strong body of troops crossed at some versts down the river, on some bridges of boats which had been established for that purpose. The grand duke did not attempt to oppose that passage. He could only have harassed them, without preventing them from having any field pieces at his disposal, and this is the reason he remained cooped up in Irkutsk.

Ivan Ogareff, a clever engineer, was certainly able to direct the operations of a regular siege; but he had not the material to carry forward his operations quickly. So, he had hoped to surprise Irkutsk, the end of all his efforts.

One can see that things had turned out otherwise than he had reckoned. On the one hand, the march of the Tartar army delayed by the battle of Tomsk; on the other, the rapidity with which the works of defense had been carried on by the grand duke; for these two reasons his projects had failed. He found himself therefore under the necessity of carrying on a regular siege.

Meanwhile, by his advice, the emir attempted twice to take the town at the price of a great sacrifice of men. He threw the soldiers against the earthworks which seemed to present some weak points; but the two assaults were repelled with the greatest courage. The grand duke and his officers did not spare themselves on that occasion; they led the civil population to the ramparts. Civilians and moujiks did their duty remarkably well.

At the second assault, the Tartars had succeeded in forcing one of the gates of the town. A fight took place at the beginning of the principal street—the Bolchaia, which is two versts in length, and terminates at the banks of the Angara. But the Cossacks, the gendarmes and the citizens opposed to them a strong resistance, and the Tartars had to return to their positions.

Ivan Ogareff thought then of trying to win by treachery what force could not give him. His project, it is known was to make his way alone into the town, and present himself before the grand duke, with some plausible tale to win his confidence, and, when the moment came, to deliver one of the gates to the besiegers; afterwards, that done, to glut his vengeance on the brother of the Czar.

The Tsigane, who had accompanied him to the camp of the Angara, urged him to put this project into execution.

And, indeed, it was necessary to act without delay. The Russian troops of the government of Irkutsk were marching to the relief of Irkutsk. They were concentrating on the higher waters of the Lena, and marching up the valley. They would surely arrive before six days. It was necessary, then, that Irkutsk should be delivered up by treachery before six days.

Ivan Ogareff did not hesitate any longer. One evening, the 2nd of October, a council of war was being held in the large room of the governor-general's palace. It was there the grand duke resided.

This palace, rising at the extremity of Bolchaia street overlooked, for a great distance the course of the river. From its front windows one could perceive the Tartar camp, and had the Tartars possessed an artillery of a longer range, they could have rendered it uninhabitable.

The grand duke, General Voranzoff, and the governor of the town, the head merchant, with whom had been joined a number of superior officers, had just past divers resolutions.

"Gentlemen," said the grand duke, "you know exactly our situation. I have a firm hope that we shall be able to hold out until the arrival of troops from Irkutsk. We shall then know well how to drive away these barbarous hordes, and it will not be my fault if they don't pay dearly for this invasion of Russian territory."

"Your highness knows that we can rely on the whole population of Irkutsk," replied General Voranzoff.

"Yes," said the grand duke, "and I render homage to its patriotism. Thank God, it has not as yet suffered from the horrors of an epidemic, or a famine, and I have reason to think it will escape them, but at the ramparts I

could not help admiring their courage. I trust, the chief of the merchants hears my words, and I beg him to report them as such."

"I thank your highness, in the name of the town," answered the chief of the merchants. "May I dare to ask you whether you expect at latest the arrival of the army of relief?"

"In six days at most," answered the grand duke. "A sharp and courageous emissary has been able to penetrate into the town this morning, and he has informed me that fifty thousand Russians are advancing by forced marches under the orders of General Kissely. They were two days ago on the banks of the Lena, at Kirensk, and now, neither cold nor snow will prevent their arrival. Fifty thousand good troops, taking the Tartars on the flank, would soon relieve us."

"I would add," said the chief of the merchants, "that the day on which your highness shall order a sortie we shall be ready to execute your orders."

"Very well, sir," answered the grand duke. "Let us wait until the leading columns appear on the heights, and we will crush the invaders."

Then, turning to General Voranzoff: "We will visit to-morrow," said he, "the works on the right hand. The Angara will soon become ice-bound, and perhaps the Tartars will be able to cross it."

"Will your highness permit me to make an observation?" said the chief of the merchants.

"Make it, sir."

"I have seen the temperature fall many a time to thirty and forty below zero, and the river has been filled with floating pieces of ice, without being entirely frozen. This is owing, no doubt, to the rapidity of the current. If, then, the Tartars have no other means of crossing the river, I can assure your highness they cannot possibly cross in that manner."

The governor-general confirmed the assertion. "It is a very fortunate circumstance," answered the grand duke. "Nevertheless, let us be prepared for every emergency."

Then, turning to the head of the police: "Have you nothing to say to me?" he asked him.

"I have to place before your highness," said the head of the police, "a petition which has been addressed to you."

"By whom?"

"By the exiles of Siberia, who, as your highness knows, are, to the number of five hundred, in this city."

The political exiles, scattered all over the province, had indeed been concentrated at Irkutsk from the commencement of the invasion. They had obeyed the order to rally at the town, and to abandon the villages where they exercised different professions. Some were doctors, others professors, either at the Japanese school or at the school of navigation. From the beginning the grand duke, like the czar, trusting to their patriotism, had armed them, and he had found in them brave defenders.

"What do the exiles ask for?" said the grand duke.

"They ask your highness' permission," answered the head of the police, "to form a special corps, and to lead the sortie."

"Yes," said the grand duke, with an emotion which he did not seek to conceal, "these exiles are Russians and it is indeed their right to fight for their country."

"I can assure your highness," said the governor-general, "that we have no better soldiers."

"But they must have a leader," said the grand duke. "Who shall he be?"

"Would your highness like to have one?" said the head of the police, "who has distinguished himself on many occasions?"

"Is he a Russian?"

"Yes, a Russian of the Baltic provinces."

"What is his name?"

"Wassili Feodor."

That exile was the father of Nadia. Wassili Feodor, as is known, exercised at Irkutsk the profession of a doctor. He was an educated and charitable man, and at the same time a man of the greatest courage and patriotism. When he was not occupied with the sick, he was engaged in organizing resistance. It was he who had united his companions in exile in common action. The exiles, up to that time scattered among the population, had borne themselves in battle in such manner as to draw the attention of the grand duke. In several sorties they had paid with their blood their debt to holy Russia—holy indeed, and adored by her children! Wassili Feodor had conducted himself heroically. On several occasions his name had been mentioned as the bravest of the brave, but he had asked neither for graces or favors, and when the exiles formed a special corps he had no idea they would choose him as their leader. When the head of the police had pronounced that name before the grand duke, the latter replied that it was not unknown to him.

"Indeed," answered General Voranzoff. "Wassili Feodor is a man of valor and courage. His influence over his companions has always been very great."

"How long has he been at Irkutsk?" asked the grand duke.

"Two years."

"And his conduct?"

"His conduct," answered the head of the police, "is that of a man who submits to the special laws under which he lives."

"General," answered the grand duke, "have the goodness to present him immediately."

The orders of the grand duke were executed, and a half hour had not passed before Wassili Feodor was introduced into his presence.

He was a man some forty years old or more, tall, and with a sad and severe countenance. One felt that all his life was summed up in this one word: struggle; and that he had struggled and suffered all his life. His traits reminded one remarkably of those of his daughter, Nadia Feodor.

More than any other thing the Tartar invasion had cut him in his dearest affection, and ruined the last hope of that father, exiled to a distance of more than eight thousand versts from his native place. A letter had informed him of the death of his wife, and, at the same time, of the departure of his daughter, who had obtained from the government permission to re-join him at Irkutsk.

Nadia had to leave him on the 10th of July. The invasion was on the 15th. If, at that time, Nadia had crossed the frontier, what had become of her in the midst of the invaders? One can conceive how this unhappy father must have been devoured with anxiety, since, from that time, he had received no news of his daughter.

Wassili Feodor, in the presence of the grand duke, bowed, and waited to be interrogated.

"Wassili Feodor," said to him the grand duke, "your companions have asked to form a picket corps. Do they know that in that corps they must fight to the last man?"

"They know it," answered Wassili Feodor.

"They wish you for leader."

"I, your highness?"

"Do you consent to put yourself at their head?"

"Yes, if the good of Russia requires it."

"Captain Feodor," said the grand duke, "you are no longer an exile."

"I thank your highness; but am I to command those who still are exiles?"

"They are no longer."

It was the pardon of all his companions in exile, now his companions in arms, which the brother of the czar granted to him!

Wassili Feodor pressed with emotion the hand which the grand duke held out to him, and he left the room.

The latter turning then towards the officers: "The czar will not refuse to accept the letter of pardon which I am drawing upon him!" said he, smiling. "We need heroes to defend the capital of Siberia, and I have just now made some."

This pardon of the exiles of Irkutsk was indeed an act of wise justice and wise policy. Night had now come on. Across the windows of the palace shone the fires of the Tartar camp, and far beyond the Angara. The river was full of floating blocks of ice, some of which were stopped by the first piles of the ancient wooden bridges. Those which the current held in the channel floated down with great rapidity. Thus it was evident, as the chief of the merchants had observed, that the Angara could scarcely freeze along the whole of its surface. Thus the defenders of Irkutsk need not fear the danger of being assailed on that side.

Ten o'clock had just struck. The grand duke was about to dismiss his officers and retire to his apartments, when a kind of uproar was heard outside the palace.

Almost immediately the door of the room opened, an aide-de-camp appeared, and advancing toward the grand duke:

"Your highness," said he, "a courier from the czar!"

CHAPTER XIII.

A simultaneous movement brought all the members of the council towards the half-open door. A courier from the czar, arrived at Irkutsk. If the officers had reflected for an instant on the improbability of that fact, they would have certainly considered it impossible.

The grand duke had quickly moved towards his aide-de-camp.

"That courier," said he. "A man entered. He had the air of one worn out by fatigue. He wore the costume of a Siberian peasant, much worn, even torn, and on which one could see bullet-holes. A Russian bonnet covered his head. A scar, badly healed, crossed his face. The man had evidently followed a long and trying route. His shoes and stockings, in a bad state, even proved that he had made part of his journey on foot."

"His highness the grand duke?" said he on entering.

The grand duke went up to him.

"Are you a courier from the czar?" he asked him.

"Yes, your highness."

"Yes, come from—?"

"Moscow."

"You left Moscow—?"

"The 15th of July."

"You are called—?"

"Michael Strogoff."

It was Ivan Ogareff. He had taken the name and position of the man whom he believed to be powerless. Neither the grand duke nor any other person in Irkutsk knew him; he had not even needed to disguise his features. As he had the means of proving his pretended identity, no one could doubt him. He came then, sustained by a will of iron, to hasten by treason and assassination the conclusion of the drama of invasion.

After the answer of Ivan Ogareff, the grand duke made a sign, and all his officers retired.

The fictitious Michael Strogoff and he remained alone in the room.

The grand duke looked at Ivan Ogareff for some seconds, and with the greatest attention. Then:

"You were, the 15th of July, at Moscow?" he asked him.

"Yes, your highness, and on the night from the 14th to the 15th, I saw his majesty the Czar at the new palace."

"You have a letter from the Czar?"

"Here it is."

And Ivan Ogareff handed to the grand duke the imperial letter, reduced to the dimensions almost microscopic.

"Was that letter given to you in that state?" asked the grand duke.

"No, your highness, but I was compelled to tear open the envelope, in order to better conceal it from the Tartar soldiers."

"Have you then been a prisoner of the Tartars?"

"Yes, your highness, during a few days," answered Ivan Ogareff. "It is on that account that, having set out from Moscow on the 15th of July, I only arrived at Irkutsk on the 2d of October, after a journey of sixty-nine days."

The grand duke took the letter. He unfolded it and recognized the signature of the czar, preceded by the sacramental formula, written with his own hand. Hence, there was no possible doubt concerning the authenticity of that letter, nor indeed concerning the identity of the courier. If his fierce look at first inspired mistrust, the grand duke did not allow it to be seen, and soon the mistrust disappeared altogether.

The grand duke remained some moments without speaking. He was reading slowly the letter, in order to thoroughly gather the sense of it.

Taking up again the speech: "Michael Strogoff, do you know the contents of this letter?" he asked.

"Yes, your highness. I might have been compelled to destroy it to prevent it from falling into the hands of the Tartars, and, if that should happen, I wished to bring its contents to your highness."

"Do you know that this letter enjoins us to die at Irkutsk rather than surrender the city?"

"I know it."

"Do you also know that it points out the movements of the troops who have combined to check the invasion?"

"Yes, your highness, but those movements have not succeeded."

"What do you mean?"

"I wish to tell you that Ichim, Omsk, Tomsk, and two Siberias, have been one after another occupied by the soldiers of Feofar-Khan."

"But has there been a battle? Have our Cossacks never met the Tartars?"

"Several times, your highness."

"And they were repulsed?"

"They were not in sufficient strength."

"Where have the encounters taken place of which you speak?"

"At Kolyvan, at Tomsk."

Up to this time, Ivan Ogareff had only told the truth; but with the object of fighting the defenders of Irkutsk by exaggerating the advantages obtained by the troops of the emir, he added:

"And a third time before Krasnoiarisk."

"And that last engagement?" asked the grand duke, whose firmly set lips scarcely allowed the words to pass.

"It was more than an engagement, your highness," answered Ivan Ogareff, "it was a battle."

"A battle?"

"Twenty thousand Russians, coming from the provinces of the frontier and from the governments of Tobolsk, came into collision with a force of a hundred and fifty thousand Tartars, and in spite of their courage they have been annihilated."

"You lie!" cried the grand duke, who endeavored, but in vain, to master his anger.

"I tell the truth, your highness," coolly replied Ivan Ogareff. "I was present at that battle of Krasnoiarisk, and it is there where I was made prisoner."

The grand duke became calm, and, by a sign he gave Ivan Ogareff to understand that he did not doubt his veracity.

"On what day did this battle of Krasnoiarisk take place?" he asked.

"On the 2nd of September."

"And now all the Tartar forces are concentrated around Irkutsk?"

"All."

"And you would number them at—?"

"Four hundred thousand men!"

A new aggregation of the Tartar army, and tending always to the same end.

"And I must not expect any succor from the provinces of the west?" asked the grand duke.

"None, your highness, at least before the end of winter."

"Very well, listen to this, Michael Strogoff. Should not relief come to me, either from the west nor the east, and were there six hundred thousand Tartars, I would not give up Irkutsk!"

The wicked eyes of Ivan Ogareff lightly blinked. The traitor seemed to say that the brother of the czar was reckoning without treason.

The grand duke, of a nervous temperament, had great difficulty in preserving his calmness on learning this disastrous news. He walked up and down the room, under the eyes of Ivan Ogareff, who covered him as a prey reserved for his vengeance. He stopped at the windows, he looked out upon the Tartar fires, he was trying to find out the noise, the greater part of which was caused by the grating of the ice on the river.

A quarter of an hour passed without his putting another question. Then, again taking up the letter, he read a passage of it and said:

"You know, Michael Strogoff, that there is a question in this letter of a traitor against whom I have to be on my guard."

"Yes, your highness."

"He is to attempt to enter Irkutsk disguised, to win my confidence; then, at the proper time, to deliver up the town to the Tartars."

"I know all that, your highness, and I also know that Ivan Ogareff has sworn personal vengeance on the brother of the czar."

"Why?"

"They say that that officer had been condemned by the grand duke to a most humiliating degradation."

"Yes—I remember. But he deserved it, that wretch, who was afterwards to serve against his country, and to lead there an invasion of barbarians!"

"His majesty, the czar," answered Ivan Ogareff, "relied especially on the fact that you were aware of the criminal projects of Ivan Ogareff against your person."

"Yes;