

Michael Strogoff, OR, THE COURIER OF THE CZAR.

By Jules Verne.

PART II. CHAPTER III.—Continued.

Sangarre, who had stolen in the shade to a spot quite near to the two women, remained there several hours, with her ears open for any information. She could hear nothing. By an instinctive feeling of prudence, not a word was exchanged between Nadia and Maria Strogoff.

The next day, the 10th of August, the loud-tongued trumpets sounded through the camp. The Tartar soldiers sprang at once to arms. Ivan Ogareff, after having quitted Zabeidiro, arrived, accompanied by a numerous staff of Tartar officers. His face was more serious than usual, and his contracted outline, indicated a great anger, which was only waiting for some object on which to hurl itself.

Michael Strogoff, lost in a group of prisoners, saw this man pass by. He had a presentiment that a great calamity was about to happen, for Ivan Ogareff now knew that Maria Strogoff was the mother of Michael Strogoff, captain in the corps of the couriers of the czar.

Ivan Ogareff arrived at the centre of the camp, dismounted from his horse, and the horsemen of his escort formed a large circle around him.

At that moment, Sangarre approached, and said: "I have nothing new of which to inform you, Ivan!"

Ivan Ogareff answered only in giving a short command to one of his officers. Immediately the ranks of the prisoners were traversed in a brutal manner by the soldiers. These unfortunate ones, urged on with blows and pushed with the wood of the lance, quickly arranged themselves along the edge of the camp. Four lines of infantry and cavalry, drawn up at the base of the camp, rendered all escape impossible.

Order for silence was given, and at that moment, Sangarre directed which way he would lead the group in the middle of the camp.

The old Siberian saw her coming. She understood what was about to happen. A disdainful smile played on her lips. Then, turning to Nadia, she said to her in a low voice: "You do not know me any longer, my daughter. Whatever happens, and however trying may be this examination, not a word, not a gesture. It is for him, not for me, they search."

At this moment, Sangarre, after having looked around for an instant, placed her hand upon the shoulder of the old Siberian.

"What do you wish from me?" said Maria Strogoff.

"Come!" answered Sangarre. "And, pushing her with her hand, she led her into the middle of the reserved space before Ivan Ogareff."

Michael Strogoff kept his eyelashes half closed, in order that the brightness of his eyes should not betray him.

Maria Strogoff, having come in front of Ivan Ogareff, straightened her person, crossed her arms and awaited.

"Are you indeed Maria Strogoff?" demanded Ivan Ogareff.

"Yes," answered the old Siberian with calmness.

"Have you changed your mind as regards the statement you made to me when, three days ago, I interrogated you at Omsk?"

"No." "So you are ignorant of the fact that your son, Michael Strogoff, courier of the czar, has passed through Omsk?"

"I am ignorant of it." "And that the man whom you believed to have recognized as your son at the post-house was not he—was not your son?"

"He was not my son." "And have you not seen him since among the prisoners?"

"No." "And if he were shown to you, would you recognize him?"

"No." At this answer, which showed an inflexible determination to avow nothing, a murmur of approbation arose from the crowd.

Ivan Ogareff could not restrain a menacing gesture.

"Listen," said he to Maria Strogoff, "your son is here, and you go at once to put him out."

"No." "All these men, taken at Omsk and at Kolyvan, are going to die before your eyes, and if you do not point out Michael Strogoff you shall receive as many blows of the knout as there shall be men who have passed before you."

Ivan Ogareff had now realized that, whatever threats he might utter, and to whatever tortures he might subject her, the indomitable Siberian would not speak. To discover the courier of the czar, he now counted, not upon her, but upon Michael Strogoff himself. He did not believe it possible that, when the mother and the son should be brought into the presence of each other, an irresistible impulse would not betray them. Certainly if he had only wished to gain possession of the imperial letter, he could simply have given orders for all these prisoners to be searched; but Michael Strogoff might have destroyed this letter, after learning its contents, and if he were not recognized and he should gain Irkutsk, the plans of Ivan Ogareff would be all frustrated. Wherefore, it was not only the letter which he must have from the traitor—he must have the bearer of it.

Nadia at length understood all, and she now knew who was Michael Strogoff, and why he had wished to traverse, without being known, the invaded provinces of Siberia.

On the order of Ivan Ogareff, the prisoners passed one by one before Maria Strogoff, who remained immovable as a statue, and whose regard expressed only the most complete indifference.

Her son was in the last ranks. "When, in his turn, he passed before his mother, Nadia shut her eyes in order not to see him!" Michael Strogoff had remained apparently impassible, but his hands were bleeding from the pressure of the fetters.

make her speak, she had already offered the sacrifice of her life for her son's safety. Maria Strogoff, having been seized by two soldiers, was thrown on her knees on the ground. Her hair, having been torn, exposed her neck and back. A dagger was fixed before her breast at the distance of only a few inches. And in case she should bend under the pain, her breast would be pierced with the sharp point.

The Tartar waited the lash. He was waiting.

"Go on!" said Ivan Ogareff. The whip lashed in the air. But before the blow had fallen, a powerful hand—had wrangled it from the hands of the Tartar.

Michael Strogoff was there! He had leaped before this horrible scene! If, at the post-house of Ichim, he had restrained himself at the blow from Ivan Ogareff, here, before his mother who was about to be struck, he was not able to master himself.

Ivan Ogareff had succeeded. "Michael Strogoff!" he cried. Then advancing.

"Ah! was this done by the man of Ichim?"

Himself!" said Michael Strogoff. And, raising the knout, he tore with it the face of Ivan Ogareff himself.

"Blow for blow!" "Well given!" cried the voice of a spectator, who fortunately hid himself in the tumult.

Twenty soldiers threw themselves on Michael Strogoff, and they were about to kill him. But, Ivan Ogareff, from whom a cry of pain and rage had escaped, stopped them with a motion of his hand.

"This man is reserved for the justice of the Emir. You may give him the lash!" "The letter to the imperial armies was found in the breast of Michael Strogoff, who had not had time to destroy it, and it was handed over to Ivan Ogareff."

The spectator who had uttered all these words—"Well given!"—was no other than Alcide Jolivet. His companion—and himself, having halted at the camp of Zabeidiro, were present at this scene.

"My God!" said he to Harry Blount, "these people of the north are rough men! Do we not owe some return to our companions of the journey? May Korpanoff or Strogoff succeed. What splendid revenge for the affair of Ichim!"

"Yes, revenge indeed," said Harry Blount, "but Strogoff is a dead man. For his sake it would perhaps be better not to remember him any longer!"

"And allow his mother to perish under the knout?" "Do you believe that he has acted better by his rash haste, than his mother and his sister?"

"I don't believe anything, I know nothing," answered Alcide Jolivet, "only had I been in his place, I should not have acted otherwise. What a wretch! Eh! what—the devil, we must boil over sometimes. God would have placed water on our veins, and not blood, had he wished us to remain always and everywhere imperturbable."

"What a splendid incident for a newspaper article!" said Harry Blount. "If Ivan Ogareff would only communicate to us the contents of that letter!"

Ivan Ogareff, after having wiped off the blood which covered his face, had broken the seal of the letter. He read it again and again for a long time, as if he wished to fathom its contents.

Then, having given his orders that Michael Strogoff, strongly fettered, should be sent on to Tomsk with the other prisoners, he took command of the troops encamped at Zabeidiro, and amidst the deafening sounds of drums and trumpets, he marched to the town where the Emir was awaiting.

CHAPTER IV.

Tomsk, founded in the year 1604, situated almost in the heart of the Siberian provinces, is one of the most important towns of Asiatic Russia. Toholsk, placed above the sixtieth degree of latitude, and Irkutsk, built beyond the hundredth meridian, have seen Tomsk increase at their expense.

And nevertheless, it is said, Tomsk is not the capital of this important province. At Tomsk reside the Governor-General of the province and the official world. But Tomsk is the most considerable town of the territory which stretches along the Altai Mountains, namely, along the Chinese frontier of the country of the Khalkas. The higher parts of these mountains, and far into the valley of the Tom, teem with platinum, gold, silver, copper and auriferous lead. The country being rich in these metals, as it is the center for the town is also rich, as it is the center for all the wealth and enterprise of that large tract of country. Moreover, the luxury of its houses, its household goods, its equipages, can rival those of the great capitals of Europe. It is the city of millionaires, whose wealth has been made by the pick-axe and spade, and, if it has not the honor of being the place of residence of the representatives of the Czar it consoles itself for this by counting in the first ranks of its notables the leading merchants of the city, the principal director of the mines belonging to the imperial government.

Formerly, Tomsk was looked upon as a town situated at the extremity of the world. If anyone wished to go there, he must undertake a very long journey. In these days, it is only like taking a walk, when the route is not troubled by the feet of invaders. In a short time will be constructed the railroad which will connect the Ural mountains, which will connect it with Perm.

Is Tomsk a beautiful city? We must acknowledge that, as regards this, travellers do not agree. Madame de Bourboulon, who stayed there some days on her journey from Shanghai to Moscow, describes it as a place little picturesque. "Were we to accept her description of it, Tomsk is only an insignificant town, with old houses of stone and brick, with narrow streets very different from those that pierce the great cities of Siberia." Many are the dirty districts, especially where the Tartars congregate, in which lazy drunkards swarm, whose very drunkenness is apathetic, as is the case with all the people of the north.

The traveler on the contrary, Henry Russell Killough, is quite enthusiastic in his admiration of Tomsk. "May it not be that he saw it in mid-winter, in its mantle of snow, while Mme. de Bourboulon only visited it during summer? This is possible, and it would confirm the opinion that some cold countries can only be appreciated in the cold season, and some warm countries in the hot season of the year."

Whatever may be the case, Mr. Russell Killough says positively that Tomsk is not only a beautiful city of Siberia, but is even one of the beautiful cities of the world; with its houses built with colored marbles and porphyries, its wide and regular streets, with sidewalks of wood, its beautiful magnificent churches reflected by the waters of the Tom, a large and noble river.

The truth is between these two opinions. Tomsk, which has some twenty-five thousand inhabitants, is picturesque, situated on a steep and rugged hill.

But the chief city of the world becomes the most happy when occupied by the invader. Who would have wished to imagine it at this time? Defended by a few battalions of in-

fantry composed of Cossacks, it had not been able to resist the attacking columns of the Emir. A certain portion of the population of Tomsk, after not having had a bad reception to these hordes, Tartars like themselves, and for the moment, Tomsk did not resemble a Russian town, any more than if it had been transferred into the centre of the Empire of Khokhaid or of Bokhara.

It was at Tomsk the Emir would receive his victor's trophies. A feast, with songs, dances and a spectacle, followed by some noisy orgies, was to be given in their honor.

The theatre, chosen for this ceremony, arranged according to a static taste, was a wide table-land stretching along a portion of the hill, and commanding the course of the Tom for some distance. The view from the hillside to the distant horizon was magnificent; that long perspective of elegant houses, the numerous churches with their graceful and lofty towers, the many meanderings of the fine river; the background of dark, thick forests, and lastly, the broad and verdant plain, dotted with groups of splendid pines and gigantic cedars.

On the left of the plateau, a dazzling decoration representing a palace of fantastical architecture—some specimen, without doubt, of those Bokharian monuments, half-Mosque, half-Tartar—had been temporarily erected along the wide terraces. Above this palace, and far above the minarets with which it was studded, among the branches of the high trees which shaded the plateau, tame storks, that had come from Bokhara with the Tartar army, whirled in hundreds.

These terraces had been reserved for the court of the Emir, for the Khans, his allies, for the grand dignitaries of the Khanates, and for the harems of each one of these chiefs of Turkestan.

Of these sultanas, who, for the most part are only slaves bought in the markets of Circassia and Persia, some had their faces uncovered, while others wore a veil which hid them altogether from sight.

All were clothed in the most luxuriant style. Elegant cloaks, the sleeves of which were left open and turned to meet at the back with a puff, allowed their naked arms to be seen, almost covered with bracelets joined together with chains of precious stones, and their little hands with the Eger-nails tinted with the juice of the "johneh." Under this first garment were petticoats of brocade, covering the silken trowsers, which reached a little above the elegant boots that the women adorned with pearls. Upon these women who were not hidden by a veil, one could admire the long plaits that escaped from turbans of varied colors, the splendid eyes, magnificent teeth, and a complexion rendered still more fair by the contrast with their dark eyelashes and tinted eyebrows.

At the foot of these terraces, sheltered under the multitude of standards and flags, the chosen guards of the Emir kept watch, with their double sabre curved back at the side, their dagger in belt, and their lance, ten feet long, in their hands. Some of these Tartars carried white battons, others enormous halberds, ornamented with top-knots made of gold and silver thread.

All around, as far as the outer edge of this vast plateau, along the steep slopes whose base was washed by the Tom, a cosmopolitan crowd was massed, composed of all the indigenous elements of Central Asia. The Usbeks were there, with their large bonnets made of the skin of black sheep, with their red beard, their gray eyes and their "arkalouk," a kind of tunic cut in the Tartar fashion. There pressed the Turcomans, dressed in their national costume, with wide trousers of camel-color, with vest and mantle woven of gauze-wool, with red conical bonnets, with high boots of Russian leather, their sabre and knife suspended by a thong; there, near their masters, stood the Turkoman women, their hair drawn back by fillets of goat-wool, their chemises open under the djouba—striped with blue, purple and green, their legs laced with colored ribbons which crossed each other down to the leather socks. There, as if all the peoples of the Russia-Chinese frontier had risen at the voice of the Emir, could be seen Mandchourians, their hair cut and temples shaved, their hair plaited, and their long robes, with a bolt gliding the figure underneath a shirt of silk, their oval-shaped bonnets of cherry-colored satin with black border and yellow fringe; then along with their admirable types of those women of Mandchouria, with head-dresses of artificial flowers which were fastened with golden pins, and butterflies delicately placed in their black hair. "Ladys, Mongols, Bokharians, Persians, Chinese of Turkestan, completed this crowd assembled for the Tartar feast."

The Siberians alone were missing at this grand reception of the invaders. Those who had not been able to flee were kept in their houses by the fear of pillage, which Feofar-Khan might order—a worthy termination of this triumphal ceremony.

It was not until four o'clock that the Emir took his position on the appointed place, amidst the noise of drums, military bands, and the discharge of musketry and artillery. Feofar-Khan mounted his favorite horse, which carried on its head a plume sparkling with diamonds. The Emir had just put on his war costume. At his side walked the Khans of Khokhaid, and of Homoudou, and he was accompanied by a large staff.

At this moment appeared on the terrace the first among the women of Feofar, the queen, if such a title can be given to sultanas. But this woman, queen, or slave, of Persian origin, was wonderfully beautiful. Contrary to the Mahometan custom, and no doubt by a caprice of the Emir, her face was uncovered. Her hair, divided into four plaits, caressed her shoulders of dazzling whiteness, which were scarcely covered with a veil of silk, shaded with gold, which adjoined at the back to a bonnet gemmed with diamonds of the greatest price. Under her petticoat of blue silk fell the "zir-danchy" of silk gauze, and over her chemise hung loosely the "pirann," a chemise of the same material gracefully hollowed towards the neck. But from her head shone forth, which were enveloped in Persian slippers, such was the profusion of jewelry, gold tresses threaded with silver wire, beads of turquoise, of filigree, necklaces from the famous mines of Eborouch, necklaces from cornelian, agates, emeralds, opals, and sapphires; that her waist and figure looked as if woven with precious stones. As for the thousands of diamonds that sparkled on her neck, her arms, her hands around her cincture, on her feet, millions of roubles would not have paid for their cost.

The Emir and the khans dismounted, as also the dignitaries who formed their cortège. All took their places under a magnificent tent, which was in the center of the first terrace. As it was the Emir's place, a sacred table before the tent, resounding bugles announced his arrival.

Ivan Ogareff—the Hashed, as they had already begun to call him—dressed this time in the uniform of a Tartar officer, arrived on horse-back before the tent of the Emir. He was accompanied by a body of the soldiers from the camp of Zabeidiro, who

drew up along the sides of the plateau, in the middle of which he remained only during the time allotted to the amusements. One could see a deep gas cutting, obliquely the face of the traitor.

Ivan Ogareff presented to the Emir his principal officers, and Feofar-Khan, without departing from the coldness, which was the main foundation of his dignity, received them in a manner which made them satisfied with their reception.

It was thus interpreted by Harry Blount and Alcide Jolivet, the two inseparables, who were now allies in hunting up news. After having quitted Zabeidiro, they had quickly reached Tomsk. Their project, long delayed, was to part company with the Tartars, to rejoin, as soon as possible, some Russian column and, if that were possible, to throw themselves with it into Irkutsk. What they had seen of the invasions, of those incendiary fires, of those pillages, of those murders, had profoundly discouraged them, and they were anxious to join, as soon as possible, the ranks of the Siberian army.

Nevertheless, Alcide Jolivet had given his brother traveler to understand that he could not leave Tomsk without having taken a pencil sketch of this triumphal entry of the Tartar troops, if it were only to satisfy the curiosity of his cousin, and Harry Blount had decided to remain some hours; but that very night both were to take the route for Irkutsk, and, being well mounted, they hoped to leave behind the scouts of the Emir.

Alcide Jolivet and Harry Blount then joined the crowd and looked on, in such a manner as not to lose any detail of a feast which was to furnish a hundred good lines for the newspapers. They gazed with astonishment at the curiosity of his cousin, and Harry Blount had decided to remain some hours; but that very night both were to take the route for Irkutsk, and, being well mounted, they hoped to leave behind the scouts of the Emir.

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about to drag her away, when Ivan Ogareff intervened, saying: "Let this woman remain."

As for Nadia, she was thrown back among the crowd of prisoners. The look of Ivan Ogareff had not fixed itself upon her.

Michael Strogoff was then led before the Emir, and there he remained erect, without lowering his eyes to the ground. Ivan Ogareff cried out to him: "No!" replied Michael Strogoff. "I would have wished to force him to bend, but he was not the robust young man."

Ivan Ogareff advanced towards Michael Strogoff. "You are about to die," said he. "I shall die," fiercely answered Michael Strogoff, "but your face of traitor, Ivan, will not be less dear, and forever, the infamous mark of the knout!"

Ivan Ogareff, at this answer became horribly pale. "Who is this prisoner?" demanded the Emir, in a voice the more menacing because of its calmness.

"A Russian spy," answered Ivan Ogareff. In making out Michael Strogoff a spy, he knew the sentence pronounced against him would be the more terrible.

Michael Strogoff moved towards Ivan Ogareff. The soldiers stopped him. The Emir then made a gesture before which the whole crowd bent their heads. Afterwards he motioned with his hand for the koran, which was brought to him. He opened the book, and placed his finger on one of the pages.

It was chance, or rather, as these Orientals think, God Himself who was about to decide the fate of Michael Strogoff. The people of Central Asia give the name of "fal" to this practice. After having interpreted the sense of the verse touched by the finger of the judge, they apply the sentence, whatever it may be.

The Emir had left his finger resting on the page of the koran. The chief of the ulmas, then approaching read with a loud voice a verse which finished with these words: "And he shall see no more the things of the earth." "Russian spy," said Feofar-Khan, "you come to see what is passing in the camp of the Tartars! Look, then, with all your eyes! Look!"

CHAPTER V. MICHAEL STROGOFF, with his hands bound, was held in front of the Emir's throne, at the foot of the terrace.

His mother, overcome at last by so many physical and moral tortures, had sunk down, not daring to look or listen any longer.