

THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

After the departure of Ivan Ogareff Nadia had hidden in the shade. She waited until the crowds left the plateau. Michael Strogoff, abandoned as a miserable being to be feared by no one, was alone. She saw him drag himself as far as his mother, bend himself down to her, kiss her forehead, then raise himself up and grope for flight.

Some moments later Michael and Nadia, hand in hand, had descended the steep hillside, and, after having followed the banks of the Tom as far as the extremity of the town, they happily passed out by a gap in the fence.

The route for Irkutsk was the only one that struck eastward. They could not make a mistake. Nadia rapidly pulled along Michael Strogoff. It was possible that early next morning, after some hours of orgies, the scouts of the emir, throwing themselves again on the steppe, would cut off all communication. It was then of the utmost importance to outstrip them and to reach Krasnoarsk before them, which was 500 versts separate from Tomsk—in one word, only to leave the highway as late as possible.

The next morning, twelve hours after their departure from Tomsk, Michael Strogoff and Nadia reached the town of Semilowosko, after a journey of fifteen versts.

CHAPTER XIV.

MICHAEL STROGOFF and Nadia had left Semilowosko about two hours when Michael stopped suddenly.

"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 is 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 his 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 Obi—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 most 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 Russian. 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 his 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 were 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?"

"On foot."

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

"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 me, and I have not a copeck to offer you, but if you will take my sister, I will follow the carriage on which I will run if it is necessary, and I will be with you in an hour."

brother is blind?"

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

"The Tartars have burned out his 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 car. I sit front to conduct. There are some good birch bark and some barley straw on the bottom. It's like a nest. Come, Serko, give us room."

The dog jumped without much asking. It was an excellent Siberian breed, with a gray 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 stretch 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 rapidly, at least new fatigue 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 that resembled 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 darlings 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 he loves! Anyhow they see you. That is perhaps some consolation."

"Yes, perhaps. Tell me, friend," demanded Michael Strogoff, "have you never seen me anywhere before today?"

"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 Kalyvan."

"From Kalyvan?" 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 telegraph operator."

"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 an Englishman and a Frenchman, rubies in their hands, disputed the turn at your wicket, and when the Englishman telegraphed the first verses of the Bible?"

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

"What! You do not remember it?"

"I never read the dispatches 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.

On the 22d of August the kibitka reached the town of Atchinsk, which was 380 versts from Tomsk. A hundred and twenty versts still separated it from Krasnoarsk. No incident had marked this journey. During the six days they had been together Nicholas, Michael Strogoff and Nadia had re-

mained 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 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 7 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."

Ten minutes afterward the kibitka entered the principal street.

Krasnoarsk was deserted! There was not any longer an Athenian in this "Athens of 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 a living soul remained in Krasnoarsk.

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 meager 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 Panaghia which 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, 26th of August, before daybreak the kibitka was traversing the park of birch trees to reach the banks of the Yenisei, which was crossed by the little party on an improvised raft.

Michael Strogoff could at length believe that the route was free as far as Irkutsk. He had outstripped the Tartars, and when the soldiers of the emir should arrive at Krasnoarsk they would only find an abandoned town there and no means of immediate communication between the two banks of the Yenisei, hence a delay of some days until a bridge of boats, difficult to construct, should open a passage to them.

For the first time since the unlucky meeting with Ivan Ogareff at Omsk the courier of the czar felt himself less uneasy and could hope that no new obstacle would arise to the accomplishment of his plans.

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

On the 28th of August the travelers had passed the town of Balaisk, which was eighty versts from Krasnoarsk, and by the 29th that of Riblusk, forty versts from Balaisk.

The next day, after traveling more than thirty-five versts, they arrived at Kamak, a more considerable town, watered by the river of the same name, a small affluent of the Yenisei, which descends from the mountains of Sayansk.

On going out from Kamak Michael informed Nadia and Nicholas that they would find only one little town of some importance, Nijai Oudinsk, before Irkutsk. Nicholas answered that he knew that there was a telegraphic station in that town. Therefore if Nijai Oudinsk had been abandoned like Kamak he would certainly be obliged to seek for some occupation in the capital of eastern Siberia.

From Kamak to the neighboring town was very long, about a hundred and thirty versts.

After having crossed the little river of Birlousa the kibitka reached Birlousinsk on the morning of the 4th of September. There, very fortunately, Nicholas, who saw his provisions becoming exhausted, found in an abandoned bakehouse a dozen cakes, prepared with mutton fat, and a large supply of boiled rice.

After a reasonable halt they continued their journey once more on the afternoon of the 5th 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 grand duke.

In coming out of Birlousinsk a hare crossed 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 watch.

"Did you not see?" said Nicholas, 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 Nadia.

"So much the better! So much the better! But I—I have seen!"

"What was it, then?" asked Michael Strogoff.

"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 him.

"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 trot.

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 Aisalevsk, as deserted as was the surrounding country.

There on the threshold of a house Nadia found two of those knives with long, sharp blades used by Siberian 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 Nijai Oudinsk.

Nicholas during the last two days had not been able to regain his usual good humor. The evil omen 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 described on the horizon the high bellies of the churches of Nijai 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 Nijai 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 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 Nijai Oudinsk.

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

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

The night had come. The Tartar horsemen, having had a bait, 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 pommel 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, they flung 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 XV.

MICHAEL STROGOFF and Nadia were once more free, as they had been during the journey from Perm to the banks of the Irutsk. But how changed were the circumstances of the journey! Then a comfortable vehicle, teams often renewed, well provided post horses, secured for them a quick journey. Now they went 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 400 versts! And, moreover, Michael Strogoff now only saw through the eyes of Nadia.

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

It was 10 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.

"To what place shall I lead you, Michael?"

"To Irkutsk," he answered.

"By the highroad?"

"Yes, Nadia."

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

Next morning, Sept. 12, twenty versts farther, at the town of Toulounovosko, both halted for a short time. The town was burned down and was deserted.

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

difficulty.

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 this never ending steppe.

And thus they walked on for three days.

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

Suddenly they 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 afterward 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 of Michael. Where was he? Nadia had not even the strength to call out to him.

Michael Strogoff, lying 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 beak, 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 to be 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 succor, 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 claspknife to release it from that imprisoned body.

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

He recognized Michael and Nadia. Then he murmured:

"Adieu, friends. 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 half a verst away.

Michael Strogoff listened.

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

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

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

"You see them! You see them!" he said to her.

"The Tartars!" she murmured.

It was indeed the advance guard of the emir which was defiling quickly on the road to Irkutsk.

"They shall not prevent me from interring him," said Michael Strogoff.

And he continued his work.

Soon Nicholas' body, with his hands joined to his breast, was laid in the tomb. Michael Strogoff and Nadia, kneeling down, prayed the last time for that poor being, good and inoffensive, who through devotedness to them had lost his life.

"And now," said Michael, throwing back the earth, "the wolves of the steppe shall not devour him."

Then his hand stretched in menace toward the troop of horsemen which was passing.

"On our journey, Nadia!" said he.

Michael Strogoff could no longer follow the highroad, now occupied by the Tartars. He must throw himself across the steppe and turn Irkutsk: In doing this they would have to cross the