

THE COURIER OF THE CZAR

By Jules Verne

They had to supply this want. A raft, or, rather, a float of wood, like those which generally float on the Siberian rivers had been constructed. A forest of pine, which towered along the shore, had furnished the floating material. The trunks, lashed together with willow branches, formed a platform on which a hundred persons would have easily found room. It was on this raft that Michael Strogooff and Nadia were carried. The young girl was once more herself. They gave to her some nourishment, as also to her companion. Then, lying down on a bed of leaves, she immediately fell into a sound sleep. To those who interrogated him Michael Strogooff said nothing concerning the events which had occurred at Tomsk. He gave himself out as an inhabitant of Krasnotarsk who had not been able to reach Irkutsk before the troops of the emir had arrived on the left bank of the Dnaka, and he added that very likely the main body of the Tartars had taken up their position before the capital of Siberia. Even among friends it was almost as important to preserve secrecy as to his mission as if among enemies. One never knows what ears are listening when the tongue speaks. The friend of today may be the foe of tomorrow, and even the firm friend, if indiscreet, is more to be dreaded than the known enemy. There was not, therefore, an instant to lose. Besides, the frost became more and more keen. The temperature during the night fell far below zero. Some pieces of ice had already formed on the surface of the Balka. If the raft could easily make its way on the lake, it would not be the same between the banks of the Angara in case the pieces of ice should come to impede its course. Therefore for all these reasons it was necessary that the fugitives should start without delay. At 8 o'clock at night the moorings were unfastened, and under the action of the current the raft followed the lake shore. Long poles, handled by robust mujiks, sufficed to guide it. An old sailor of the Balka had taken command of the raft. He was a man of sixty, all tanned with the breezes of the lake. A white and very thick beard descended on his breast. He had on his head a fur hat. Of a grave and austere appearance, his wide and long riding coat, drawn tight at the belt, hanging down to his heels, this silent old man, sitting at the stern, commanded by gesture and did not speak ten words in ten hours. Besides, the whole management consisted in keeping the raft in the current which ran along the shore, without allowing it to go far out into the deep water. Although the journey was not without danger, the voyagers might reasonably hope to safely accomplish it. At any rate they had become accustomed to both hardship and danger. No fate could be worse than the one that awaited them if they remained. So despite the past and present they were many hopeful, almost happy hearts on board that rude craft that floated along so lazily.

CHAPTER XVI.

A special incident marked this journey on the lake. Nadia had remained in a profound stupor. Sleep had only overpowered Michael Strogooff at long intervals, and still his thoughts were ever watching over her. At daybreak the raft, retarded by a somewhat strong breeze which was blowing against the action of the current, was still forty versts from the mouth of the Angara. Most likely they would not be able to reach it before 3 or 4 o'clock in the afternoon. This was not an inconvenience; rather the contrary, for the fugitives would then descend the river during the night, and the darkness would favor their arrival at Irkutsk. At 4 o'clock in the afternoon the mouth of the Angara was signalled by the old mariner between the high granite rocks of the coast. One could perceive on the right bank the little port of Livenitchnaia, its church, its few houses built on the steep. But there was a grave circumstance. The first floating ice that had come from the east was already forming between the banks of the Angara and was descending toward Irkutsk. However, their number could not as yet be great enough to obstruct the river nor the cold severe enough to unite them into one mass. The raft arrived at the little port and stopped there for a short time. The old mariner had decided to put into port for an hour in order to make some indispensable repairs. The trunks, having become loose, threatened to separate from one another, and it was of great importance to refastened them more firmly together so that they might resist the current of the Angara, which is very rapid. The old sailor did not, therefore, expect any more fugitives at the port of Livenitchnaia, and yet at the moment he was leaving the shore two

men, coming out of a deserted house, ran with great haste to the bank. Nadia, sitting at the back part of the raft, looked at them in a listless manner. A cry was about to escape her. She seized the hand of Michael Strogooff, who at that moment raised his head. "What is the matter with you, Nadia?" he asked. "Our two fellow travelers, Michael that Frenchman and that Englishman whom we met in the defiles of the Ural mountains." "Yes." "Michael Strogooff shuddered, for the strict injunction from which he did not wish to depart was in danger of being unaided. And in reality it was not any longer Nicholas Korpanoff whom Alcide Jolivet and Harry Blount were about to see in him now, but the true Michael Strogooff, the courier of the czar. The journalists had already met him twice since their separation at the posthouse of Ichim: the first time at the camp of Zabedero, when he cut with the blow of the knout the face of Ivan Ogareff, the second time at Tomsk, when he was condemned by the emir. They knew therefore what to think of him and his true position as courier of the czar. Michael Strogooff quickly took up his part. "Nadia," said he, "when that Frenchman and Englishman shall come on board beg them to come up to me." They were indeed Harry Blount and Alcide Jolivet, whom not chance, but the force of events, had conducted to the port of Livenitchnaia. Just as they had led Michael Strogooff. The reader knows that after having been present at the triumphal entry of the Tartars into Tomsk they had gone away before the savage execution which terminated the feast. They had no doubt but their old fellow traveler had been put to death, and they were quite unaware that he had been only made blind by order of the emir. Then, having procured horses, they had abandoned Tomsk that very night, with the fixed intention of dating henceforth their articles from Russian camps of eastern Siberia. Alcide Jolivet and Harry Blount set out for Irkutsk by forced marches. They had great hopes of outstripping Feofar-Khan, and most certainly they would have done so had not a third column unexpectedly made its appearance, having come from the southern provinces of the Yenisei. Like Michael Strogooff, they were cut off before having even reached the Dnaka. Hence they were again compelled to go down as far as Lake Balka. When they arrived at Livenitchnaia, the port was already deserted. On any other side it was impossible for them to enter Irkutsk, which was invested by the Tartar armies. They had been there for three days, and very much embarrassed, when the raft arrived. The design of the fugitives was communicated to them. There was certainly some chance of their being able to pass during the night and penetrate into Irkutsk. They therefore resolved to make the attempt. Alcide Jolivet at once placed himself in communication with the old mariner and asked passage for his companion and himself, offering to pay the fare he fixed, whatever it might be. "Here one does not pay anything," gravely answered the old mariner. "One risks his life; that is all." The two journalists embarked, and Nadia saw them take their place in the fore part of the raft. Harry Blount was always the cold Englishman who had scarcely addressed a word to her during the whole journey across the Ural mountains. Alcide Jolivet seemed a little more grave than usual, and one would acknowledge that his gravity was justified by that of the circumstances. Alcide Jolivet was then installed on the fore part of the raft, when he felt a hand rest on his arm. He turned round and recognized Nadia, the sister of him who was no longer Nicholas Korpanoff, but Michael Strogooff, courier of the czar. A cry of surprise was about to escape him when he saw the young girl place her finger on her lips. "Come," said Nadia to him. And, assuming an air of indifference, Alcide Jolivet, making a sign to Harry Blount to accompany him, followed her. But if the surprise of the journalists was great at meeting Nadia on that raft it was without limits when they perceived Michael Strogooff, whom they could not believe to be still alive. Michael Strogooff had not moved at their approach. Alcide Jolivet had turned himself toward the young girl. "Gentlemen, he does not see you," said the young girl. "The Tartars have burned out his eyes! My poor brother is blind!" A deep feeling of pity was pictured on the face of Alcide Jolivet and his companion. An instant afterward both of them, seated near Michael Strogooff, warmly shook his hands and waited for him to speak.

"Gentlemen," said Michael Strogooff in a low voice, "you must not know who I am nor what I came to do in Siberia. I beg you to respect my secret. Do you promise me?" "On my honor," answered Alcide Jolivet. "On my faith as a gentleman," added Harry Blount. "Very well, gentlemen." "Can we be of any use to you?" asked Harry Blount. "Would you wish us to help you to accomplish your task?" "I prefer to act alone," said Michael Strogooff. "But those scoundrels have burned out your sight," said Alcide Jolivet. "I have Nadia, and her eyes suffice." Half an hour later the raft, after having left the little port of Livenitchnaia, was fairly in the river. It was 5 o'clock in the evening. Night was fast coming on. It would be very dark and very cold also, for the temperature was already below zero. Alcide Jolivet and Harry Blount, although they had promised Michael Strogooff to keep his secret, yet did not leave his side. They spoke in a low voice, and the blind man, putting what he already knew to what they now told him, was enabled to form an exact idea of the state of affairs. He was certain that the Tartars were actually investing Irkutsk and that the three columns had already formed a junction. One could not therefore doubt that the emir and Ivan Ogareff were before the capital. But why that haste to arrive there of the courier of the czar, now that the emperor's letter could no longer be admitted by him to the grand duke, and he did not even know its contents? Alcide Jolivet and Harry Blount could no more understand than could Nadia. Besides, they had not spoken of the past up to the moment when Alcide Jolivet thought it his duty to say to Michael Strogooff: "We almost owe you some excuses for not having shaken hands with you before our separation at the posthouse of Ichim." "No; you had a right to believe me a coward." "Anyhow," added Alcide Jolivet, "you have splendidly whipped that villain, and he will carry the marks of it a long time." "No, not a long time," simply answered Michael Strogooff. In half an hour after the departure from Livenitchnaia Alcide Jolivet and Harry Blount had heard all the details of the cruel trials through which Michael Strogooff and his companion had successively passed. They could not but openly admire an energy which the devotedness of the young girl alone had been able to equal. And of Michael Strogooff they had formed the very same opinion which had been so well expressed by the czar at Moscow: "In truth, he is a man." At 8 o'clock at night, as the aspect of the sky had forewarned them, an excessive darkness enveloped all the country. The moon, being new, would not rise above the horizon. From the middle of the river the banks were visible. The cliffs at not a great height were blended with those heavy clouds which they displaced with difficulty. At intervals a breeze would come from the east and seem to expire in that narrow valley of the Angara. The old mariner, lying down on the fore part of the raft near his men, occupied himself altogether in turning aside from the ice blocks, a maneuver which he executed without making any noise. This drifting of the ice, after all, was a favorable circumstance as long as it did not oppose an insurmountable obstacle in the passage of the raft; for indeed this apparatus alone on the free waters of the river would have run the risk of being perceived even through the thick shade, whereas it was now confounded with these moving masses of all sizes and all shapes, and the din produced by the grating of the blocks drowned all other suspicious noise. There was a very keen frost. The fugitives suffered dreadfully from it, not having any other shelter but some branches of the birch tree. They pressed close to each other in order to better support the low temperature, which during that night had reached 10 degrees below zero. Michael Strogooff and Nadia, lying down at the back part of the raft, endured without complaint this additional suffering. For a man who was reckoning soon to attain his end Michael Strogooff seemed singularly calm. Besides, in the most grave situations his energy had never abandoned him. Already he looked forward to the moment when at last it would be permitted him to think of his mother, of Nadia, of himself. He only feared one last and evil chance. It was lest the raft should be absolutely stopped by a barrier of thick ice before having reached Irkutsk. He did not think of anything but that, being, moreover, decided if it were necessary to attempt some supreme act of daring. Nadia, refreshed by some hours of repose, had recovered that physical energy which misery had sometimes been able to subdue without ever having shaken her moral energy. She was thinking also that in case Michael Strogooff should make a new effort to attain his end she must be there to guide him. But at the time that she was approaching Irkutsk the image of her father was pictured more vividly in her mind. She saw him in the invested town, far from those he cherished, but—far she did not doubt it—struggling against the invaders with all the dash of his patriotism. Before many hours, if heaven should at length favor them, she would be in his arms, reciting to him the last words of her mother, and nothing should again separate them. The raft still moved on, unperceived, amid the mass of floating ice. Up to this time no Tartar detachment had been signalled on the high banks of the Angara, and this indicated that

the raft had not as yet come on a line with their outposts. Meanwhile it was necessary to maneuver with more care in the midst of the ice, which was fast closing. The old mariner rose up, and the mujiks took up again their boat-hooks. All had as much as they could do, and the management of the raft became more and more difficult, for the bed of the river was becoming obstructed. Michael Strogooff had moved softly to the fore part of the raft. Alcide Jolivet had followed him. Both listened to what the old sailor and his men were saying. "Guard there on the right!" "Look! The blocks of ice are thickening on the left!" "Keep it off! Keep it off with your boat-hook!" "Before an hour we shall be stopped!" "If God wills it!" replied the old sailor. "Against his will nothing can be done." "You hear them?" said Alcide Jolivet. "Yes," replied Michael Strogooff, "but God is with us." Meantime the situation became more and more serious. If the raft once ceased to make headway, the fugitives would not only never reach Irkutsk, but they would be obliged to abandon their floating apparatus, which, crushed by the ice blocks, would not be long in sinking under the waters. The willow bindings were already breaking, the fir trunks, violently separated, were becoming entangled under the hard crust, and soon the unfortunate people would have no other refuge than the ice itself. Then, when daylight should come, they would be perceived by the Tartars and massacred without pity. Michael Strogooff returned to the back part of the raft, where Nadia was waiting for him. He approached the young girl, he took her hand and put to her that invariable question: "Nadia, are you ready?" to which she answered as usual: "I am ready." For some versts more the raft continued to make its way through the floating ice. If the Angara should be choked up with ice, it would form a barrier, and consequently it would be impossible to follow the current. Already the passage down the river was slower. At every instant there were collisions, or time was lost by having to make long turnings. Here they must escape landing on the ice, there they must take a narrow pass between it in line, many anxious drawbacks. And now only a few hours of the night remained. If the fugitives did not reach Irkutsk before 5 o'clock in the morning, they must give up all hope of ever entering there. At length, at half past 1, in spite of all their united efforts, the raft struck against a thick barrier and stopped altogether. The ice which was floating down the river cast itself upon it and forced it against the obstacle and held it motionless as if it had been driven upon a reef. At this place the Angara becomes narrowed to not more than half its normal breadth; hence the accumulation of ice blocks, which were by little and little piled one upon another under the action of the double pressure, which was considerable, and of the cold, whose intensity was redoubling. At 500 paces down the river again became wide, and ice blocks, detaching themselves by little and little from the lower edge of that field, continued to float down to Irkutsk; hence it is probable that without that narrowing of the banks the barrier would not have been formed, and the raft could have continued to descend the current. But the evil was irreparable, and the fugitives had to give up all hope of reaching the end of their journey. If they had had at their disposal the tools which the whalers usually employ to open out canals across the icefields, if they had been able to cut this field as far as the place where the river became wider, perhaps the time would not have been wanting, but not a single saw, not a pickaxe, nothing with which to cut the crust, which the extreme cold had rendered as hard as granite. What should they do? At that moment rifle shots were heard on the right bank of the Angara. A shower of bullets was directed upon the raft. Had the unhappy men been perceived? Evidently, for other detonations resounded on the left bank. The fugitives caught between two fires, became a target for the Tartar marksmen. They were wounded by these balls, although in the midst of the great darkness they only fell by chance. "Come, Nadia," whispered Michael Strogooff in the ear of the young girl. Without making any observation, ready for everything, Nadia took the hand of Michael Strogooff. "I am thinking of crossing the barrier," he said to her in a low voice. "Guide me, but let no one see us leave the raft." Nadia obeyed. Michael Strogooff and she glided quickly over the surface of the icefield in a silence that was broken here and there by the firing. Nadia crept on in front of Michael Strogooff. The balls fell around them like a shower of hailstones and crashed upon the ice. The surface of the field, rugged and with sharp edges, made their hands bleed, but still they kept advancing. Ten minutes afterward 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 toward the town. Nadia understood what Michael Strogooff 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 Strogooff 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 Strogooff 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 Strogooff, 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. Toward 2 o'clock in the morning a double row of lights lit up the somber 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 Strogooff was not more than half a verst from the city. "At last!" whispered he. But suddenly Nadia gave a cry. At that cry Michael Strogooff 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 reflections of blue lights, became terrible to look at, and then, as though his eyes had been reopened to the light, he cried: "Ah, God himself is against us!"

CHAPTER XVII.
IRKUTSK, capital of eastern Siberia, has in ordinary times a population of 30,000 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 disorder 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 bellies, 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, beweened by one European by its uncanalized streets, bordered by sidewalks, with their rows of gigantic birch trees, by its brick and wooden houses, some of which have several stories, by its many splendid equipages 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 abounded 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 Mongols-Khalkas, people from Toungouze and Bourket, 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 2,000 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 countries beyond the Balkan mountains. Nicholas, 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 it was menacing. 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 St. Petersburg and Moscow. He could even answer them. Afterward 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 price the occupation of the capital of Siberia. The few troops sent-

tered over the province of Amur 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 Balka, 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, the 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 afterward 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 24th 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 archduke'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 three 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 Feofar-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 it, not 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 mujiks 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 Bolshaya, 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; afterward, that done, to glut his vengeance on the brother of the czar.

To be continued...

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