Michael Strogoff

By

Jules Verne

BOOK I

CHAPTER I A FETE AT THE NEW PALACE

"SIRE, a fresh dispatch."

"Whence?"

"From Tomsk?"

"Is the wire cut beyond that city?"

"Yes, sire, since yesterday."

"Telegraph hourly to Tomsk, General, and keep me informed of all that occurs."

"Sire, it shall be done," answered General Kissoff.

These words were exchanged about two hours after midnight, at the moment when the fete given at the New Palace was at the height of its splendor.

During the whole evening the bands of the Preobra-jensky and Paulowsky

regiments had played without cessation polkas, mazurkas, schottisches, and waltzes from among the choicest of their repertoires. Innumerable couples of dancers whirled through the magnificent saloons of the palace, which stood at a few paces only from the "old house of stones"--in former days the scene of so many terrible dramas, the echoes of whose walls were this night awakened by the gay strains of the musicians.

The grand-chamberlain of the court, was, besides, well seconded in his arduous and delicate duties. The grand-dukes and their aides-de-camp, the chamberlains-in-waiting and other officers of the palace, presided personally in the arrangement of the dances. The grand duchesses, covered with diamonds, the ladies-in-waiting in their most exquisite costumes, set the example to the wives of the military and civil dignitaries of the ancient "city of white stone." When, therefore, the signal for the "polonaise" resounded through the saloons, and the guests of all ranks took part in that measured promenade, which on occasions of this kind has all the importance of a national dance, the mingled costumes, the sweeping robes adorned with lace, and uniforms covered with orders, presented a scene of dazzling splendor, lighted by hundreds of lusters multiplied tenfold by the numerous mirrors adorning the walls.

The grand saloon, the finest of all those contained in the New Palace, formed to this procession of exalted personages and splendidly dressed women a frame worthy of the magnificence they displayed. The rich

ceiling, with its gilding already softened by the touch of time, appeared as if glittering with stars. The embroidered drapery of the curtains and doors, falling in gorgeous folds, assumed rich and varied hues, broken by the shadows of the heavy masses of damask.

Through the panes of the vast semicircular bay-windows the light, with which the saloons were filled, shone forth with the brilliancy of a conflagration, vividly illuminating the gloom in which for some hours the palace had been shrouded. The attention of those of the guests not taking part in the dancing was attracted by the contrast. Resting in the recesses of the windows, they could discern, standing out dimly in the darkness, the vague outlines of the countless towers, domes, and spires which adorn the ancient city. Below the sculptured balconies were visible numerous sentries, pacing silently up and down, their rifles carried horizontally on the shoulder, and the spikes of their helmets glittering like flames in the glare of light issuing from the palace. The steps also of the patrols could be heard beating time on the stones beneath with even more regularity than the feet of the dancers on the floor of the saloon. From time to time the watchword was repeated from post to post, and occasionally the notes of a trumpet, mingling with the strains of the orchestra, penetrated into their midst. Still farther down, in front of the facade, dark masses obscured the rays of light which proceeded from the windows of the New Palace. These were boats descending the course of a river, whose waters, faintly illumined by a few lamps, washed the lower portion of the terraces.

The principal personage who has been mentioned, the giver of the fete, and to whom General Kissoff had been speaking in that tone of respect with which sovereigns alone are usually addressed, wore the simple uniform of an officer of chasseurs of the guard. This was not affectation on his part, but the custom of a man who cared little for dress, his contrasting strongly with the gorgeous costumes amid which he moved, encircled by his escort of Georgians, Cossacks, and Circassians--a brilliant band, splendidly clad in the glittering uniforms of the Caucasus.

This personage, of lofty stature, affable demeanor, and physiognomy calm, though bearing traces of anxiety, moved from group to group, seldom speaking, and appearing to pay but little attention either to the merriment of the younger guests or the graver remarks of the exalted dignitaries or members of the diplomatic corps who represented at the Russian court the principal governments of Europe. Two or three of these astute politicians--physiognomists by virtue of their profession--failed not to detect on the countenance of their host symptoms of disquietude, the source of which eluded their penetration; but none ventured to interrogate him on the subject.

It was evidently the intention of the officer of chasseurs that his own anxieties should in no way cast a shade over the festivities; and, as he was a personage whom almost the population of a world in itself was wont to obey, the gayety of the ball was not for a moment checked.

Nevertheless, General Kissoff waited until the officer to whom he had just communicated the dispatch forwarded from Tomsk should give him permission to withdraw; but the latter still remained silent. He had taken the telegram, he had read it carefully, and his visage became even more clouded than before. Involuntarily he sought the hilt of his sword, and then passed his hand for an instant before his eyes, as though, dazzled by the brilliancy of the light, he wished to shade them, the better to see into the recesses of his own mind.

"We are, then," he continued, after having drawn General Kissoff aside towards a window, "since yesterday without intelligence from the Grand Duke?"

"Without any, sire; and it is to be feared that in a short time dispatches will no longer cross the Siberian frontier."

"But have not the troops of the provinces of Amoor and Irkutsk, as those also of the Trans-Balkan territory, received orders to march immediately upon Irkutsk?"

"The orders were transmitted by the last telegram we were able to send beyond Lake Baikal."

"And the governments of Yeniseisk, Omsk, Semipolatinsk, and Tobolsk--are we still in direct communication with them as before the insurrection?"

"Yes, sire; our dispatches have reached them, and we are assured at the present moment that the Tartars have not advanced beyond the Irtish and the Obi."

"And the traitor Ivan Ogareff, are there no tidings of him?"

"None," replied General Kissoff. "The head of the police cannot state whether or not he has crossed the frontier."

"Let a description of him be immediately dispatched to Nijni-Novgorod, Perm, Ekaterenburg, Kasirnov, Tioumen, Ishim, Omsk, Tomsk, and to all the telegraphic stations with which communication is yet open."

"Your majesty's orders shall be instantly carried out."

"You will observe the strictest silence as to this."

The General, having made a sign of respectful assent, bowing low, mingled with the crowd, and finally left the apartments without his departure being remarked.

The officer remained absorbed in thought for a few moments, when, recovering himself, he went among the various groups in the saloon, his countenance reassuming that calm aspect which had for an instant been disturbed.

Nevertheless, the important occurrence which had occasioned these rapidly exchanged words was not so unknown as the officer of the chasseurs of the guard and General Kissoff had possibly supposed. It was not spoken of officially, it is true, nor even officiously, since tongues were not free; but a few exalted personages had been informed, more or less exactly, of the events which had taken place beyond the frontier. At any rate, that which was only slightly known, that which was not matter of conversation even between members of the corps diplomatique, two guests, distinguished by no uniform, no decoration, at this reception in the New Palace, discussed in a low voice, and with apparently very correct information.

By what means, by the exercise of what acuteness had these two ordinary mortals ascertained that which so many persons of the highest rank and importance scarcely even suspected? It is impossible to say. Had they the gifts of foreknowledge and foresight? Did they possess a supplementary sense, which enabled them to see beyond that limited horizon which bounds all human gaze? Had they obtained a peculiar power of divining the most secret events? Was it owing to the habit, now become a second nature, of living on information, that their mental constitution had thus become really transformed? It was difficult to escape from this conclusion.

Of these two men, the one was English, the other French; both were tall and thin, but the latter was sallow as are the southern Provencals, while the former was ruddy like a Lancashire gentleman. The

Anglo-Norman, formal, cold, grave, parsimonious of gestures and words, appeared only to speak or gesticulate under the influence of a spring operating at regular intervals. The Gaul, on the contrary, lively and petulant, expressed himself with lips, eyes, hands, all at once, having twenty different ways of explaining his thoughts, whereas his interlocutor seemed to have only one, immutably stereotyped on his brain.

The strong contrast they presented would at once have struck the most superficial observer; but a physiognomist, regarding them closely, would have defined their particular characteristics by saying, that if the Frenchman was "all eyes," the Englishman was "all ears."

In fact, the visual apparatus of the one had been singularly perfected by practice. The sensibility of its retina must have been as instantaneous as that of those conjurors who recognize a card merely by a rapid movement in cutting the pack or by the arrangement only of marks invisible to others. The Frenchman indeed possessed in the highest degree what may be called "the memory of the eye."

The Englishman, on the contrary, appeared especially organized to listen and to hear. When his aural apparatus had been once struck by the sound of a voice he could not forget it, and after ten or even twenty years he would have recognized it among a thousand. His ears, to be sure, had not the power of moving as freely as those of animals who are provided with large auditory flaps; but, since scientific men know that human ears

possess, in fact, a very limited power of movement, we should not be far wrong in affirming that those of the said Englishman became erect, and turned in all directions while endeavoring to gather in the sounds, in a manner apparent only to the naturalist. It must be observed that this perfection of sight and hearing was of wonderful assistance to these two men in their vocation, for the Englishman acted as correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, and the Frenchman, as correspondent of what newspaper, or of what newspapers, he did not say; and when asked, he replied in a jocular manner that he corresponded with "his cousin Madeleine." This Frenchman, however, neath his careless surface, was wonderfully shrewd and sagacious. Even while speaking at random, perhaps the better to hide his desire to learn, he never forgot himself. His loquacity even helped him to conceal his thoughts, and he was perhaps even more discreet than his confrere of the Daily Telegraph. Both were present at this fete given at the New Palace on the night of the 15th of July in their character of reporters.

It is needless to say that these two men were devoted to their mission in the world--that they delighted to throw themselves in the track of the most unexpected intelligence--that nothing terrified or discouraged them from succeeding--that they possessed the imperturbable sang froid and the genuine intrepidity of men of their calling. Enthusiastic jockeys in this steeplechase, this hunt after information, they leaped hedges, crossed rivers, sprang over fences, with the ardor of pure-blooded racers, who will run "a good first" or die!

Their journals did not restrict them with regard to money--the surest, the most rapid, the most perfect element of information known to this day. It must also be added, to their honor, that neither the one nor the other ever looked over or listened at the walls of private life, and that they only exercised their vocation when political or social interests were at stake. In a word, they made what has been for some years called "the great political and military reports."

It will be seen, in following them, that they had generally an independent mode of viewing events, and, above all, their consequences, each having his own way of observing and appreciating.

The French correspondent was named Alcide Jolivet. Harry Blount was the name of the Englishman. They had just met for the first time at this fete in the New Palace, of which they had been ordered to give an account in their papers. The dissimilarity of their characters, added to a certain amount of jealousy, which generally exists between rivals in the same calling, might have rendered them but little sympathetic. However, they did not avoid each other, but endeavored rather to exchange with each other the chat of the day. They were sportsmen, after all, hunting on the same ground. That which one missed might be advantageously secured by the other, and it was to their interest to meet and converse.

This evening they were both on the look out; they felt, in fact, that there was something in the air.

"Even should it be only a wildgoose chase," said Alcide Jolivet to himself, "it may be worth powder and shot."

The two correspondents therefore began by cautiously sounding each other.

"Really, my dear sir, this little fete is charming!" said Alcide Jolivet pleasantly, thinking himself obliged to begin the conversation with this eminently French phrase.

"I have telegraphed already, 'splendid!'" replied Harry Blount calmly, employing the word specially devoted to expressing admiration by all subjects of the United Kingdom.

"Nevertheless," added Alcide Jolivet, "I felt compelled to remark to my cousin--"

"Your cousin?" repeated Harry Blount in a tone of surprise, interrupting his brother of the pen.

"Yes," returned Alcide Jolivet, "my cousin Madeleine. It is with her that I correspond, and she likes to be quickly and well informed, does my cousin. I therefore remarked to her that, during this fete, a sort of cloud had appeared to overshadow the sovereign's brow."

"To me, it seemed radiant," replied Harry Blount, who perhaps, wished to conceal his real opinion on this topic.

"And, naturally, you made it 'radiant,' in the columns of the Daily Telegraph."

"Exactly."

"Do you remember, Mr. Blount, what occurred at Zakret in 1812?"

"I remember it as well as if I had been there, sir," replied the English correspondent.

"Then," continued Alcide Jolivet, "you know that, in the middle of a fete given in his honor, it was announced to the Emperor Alexander that Napoleon had just crossed the Niemen with the vanguard of the French army. Nevertheless the Emperor did not leave the fete, and notwithstanding the extreme gravity of intelligence which might cost him his empire, he did not allow himself to show more uneasiness."

"Than our host exhibited when General Kissoff informed him that the telegraphic wires had just been cut between the frontier and the government of Irkutsk."

"Ah! you are aware of that?"

"I am!"

"As regards myself, it would be difficult to avoid knowing it, since my last telegram reached Udinsk," observed Alcide Jolivet, with some satisfaction.

"And mine only as far as Krasnoiarsk," answered Harry Blount, in a no less satisfied tone.

"Then you know also that orders have been sent to the troops of Nikolaevsk?"

"I do, sir; and at the same time a telegram was sent to the Cossacks of the government of Tobolsk to concentrate their forces."

"Nothing can be more true, Mr. Blount; I was equally well acquainted with these measures, and you may be sure that my dear cousin shall know of them to-morrow."

"Exactly as the readers of the Daily Telegraph shall know it also, M. Jolivet."

"Well, when one sees all that is going on...."

"And when one hears all that is said...."

"An interesting campaign to follow, Mr. Blount."

"I shall follow it, M. Jolivet!"

"Then it is possible that we shall find ourselves on ground less safe, perhaps, than the floor of this ball-room."

"Less safe, certainly, but--"

"But much less slippery," added Alcide Jolivet, holding up his companion, just as the latter, drawing back, was about to lose his equilibrium.

Thereupon the two correspondents separated, pleased that the one had not stolen a march on the other.

At that moment the doors of the rooms adjoining the great reception saloon were thrown open, disclosing to view several immense tables beautifully laid out, and groaning under a profusion of valuable china and gold plate. On the central table, reserved for the princes, princesses, and members of the corps diplomatique, glittered an epergne of inestimable price, brought from London, and around this chef-d'oeuvre of chased gold reflected under the light of the lusters a thousand pieces of most beautiful service from the manufactories of Sevres.

The guests of the New Palace immediately began to stream towards the

supper-rooms.

At that moment. General Kissoff, who had just re-entered, quickly approached the officer of chasseurs.

"Well?" asked the latter abruptly, as he had done the former time.

"Telegrams pass Tomsk no longer, sire."

"A courier this moment!"

The officer left the hall and entered a large antechamber adjoining. It was a cabinet with plain oak furniture, situated in an angle of the New Palace. Several pictures, amongst others some by Horace Vernet, hung on the wall.

The officer hastily opened a window, as if he felt the want of air, and stepped out on a balcony to breathe the pure atmosphere of a lovely July night. Beneath his eyes, bathed in moonlight, lay a fortified inclosure, from which rose two cathedrals, three palaces, and an arsenal. Around this inclosure could be seen three distinct towns: Kitai-Gorod, Beloi-Gorod, Zemlianai-Gorod--European, Tartar, and Chinese quarters of great extent, commanded by towers, belfries, minarets, and the cupolas of three hundred churches, with green domes, surmounted by the silver cross. A little winding river, here and there reflected the rays of the moon.

This river was the Moskowa; the town Moscow; the fortified inclosure the Kremlin; and the officer of chasseurs of the guard, who, with folded arms and thoughtful brow, was listening dreamily to the sounds floating from the New Palace over the old Muscovite city, was the Czar.

CHAPTER II RUSSIANS AND TARTARS

THE Czar had not so suddenly left the ball-room of the New Palace, when the fete he was giving to the civil and military authorities and principal people of Moscow was at the height of its brilliancy, without ample cause; for he had just received information that serious events were taking place beyond the frontiers of the Ural. It had become evident that a formidable rebellion threatened to wrest the Siberian provinces from the Russian crown.

Asiatic Russia, or Siberia, covers a superficial area of 1,790,208 square miles, and contains nearly two millions of inhabitants. Extending from the Ural Mountains, which separate it from Russia in Europe, to the shores of the Pacific Ocean, it is bounded on the south by Turkestan and the Chinese Empire; on the north by the Arctic Ocean, from the Sea of Kara to Behring's Straits. It is divided into several governments or provinces, those of Tobolsk, Yeniseisk, Irkutsk, Omsk, and Yakutsk; contains two districts, Okhotsk and Kamtschatka; and possesses two countries, now under the Muscovite dominion--that of the Kirghiz and that of the Tshouktshes. This immense extent of steppes, which includes more than one hundred and ten degrees from west to east, is a land to which criminals and political offenders are banished.

Two governor-generals represent the supreme authority of the Czar over this vast country. The higher one resides at Irkutsk, the far capital of Eastern Siberia. The River Tchouna separates the two Siberias.

No rail yet furrows these wide plains, some of which are in reality extremely fertile. No iron ways lead from those precious mines which make the Siberian soil far richer below than above its surface. The traveler journeys in summer in a kibick or telga; in winter, in a sledge.

An electric telegraph, with a single wire more than eight thousand versts in length, alone affords communication between the western and eastern frontiers of Siberia. On issuing from the Ural, it passes through Ekaterenburg, Kasirnov, Tioumen, Ishim, Omsk, Elamsk, Kolyvan, Tomsk, Krasnoiarsk, Nijni-Udinsk, Irkutsk, Verkne-Nertschink, Strelink, Albazine, Blagowstenks, Radde, Orlomskaya, Alexandrowskoe, and Nikolaevsk; and six roubles and nineteen copecks are paid for every word sent from one end to the other. From Irkutsk there is a branch to Kiatka, on the Mongolian frontier; and from thence, for thirty copecks a word, the post conveys the dispatches to Pekin in a fortnight.

It was this wire, extending from Ekaterenburg to Nikolaevsk, which had been cut, first beyond Tomsk, and then between Tomsk and Kolyvan.

This was why the Czar, to the communication made to him for the second time by General Kissoff, had answered by the words, "A courier this moment!"

The Czar remained motionless at the window for a few moments, when the

door was again opened. The chief of police appeared on the threshold.

"Enter, General," said the Czar briefly, "and tell me all you know of Ivan Ogareff."

"He is an extremely dangerous man, sire," replied the chief of police.

"He ranked as colonel, did he not?"

"Yes, sire."

"Was he an intelligent officer?"

"Very intelligent, but a man whose spirit it was impossible to subdue; and possessing an ambition which stopped at nothing, he became involved in secret intrigues, and was degraded from his rank by his Highness the Grand Duke, and exiled to Siberia."

"How long ago was that?"

"Two years since. Pardoned after six months of exile by your majesty's favor, he returned to Russia."

"And since that time, has he not revisited Siberia?"

"Yes, sire; but he voluntarily returned there," replied the chief of

police, adding, and slightly lowering his voice, "there was a time, sire, when NONE returned from Siberia."

"Well, whilst I live, Siberia is and shall be a country whence men CAN return."

The Czar had the right to utter these words with some pride, for often, by his clemency, he had shown that Russian justice knew how to pardon.

The head of the police did not reply to this observation, but it was evident that he did not approve of such half-measures. According to his idea, a man who had once passed the Ural Mountains in charge of policemen, ought never again to cross them. Now, it was not thus under the new reign, and the chief of police sincerely deplored it. What! no banishment for life for other crimes than those against social order! What! political exiles returning from Tobolsk, from Yakutsk, from Irkutsk! In truth, the chief of police, accustomed to the despotic sentences of the ukase which formerly never pardoned, could not understand this mode of governing. But he was silent, waiting until the Czar should interrogate him further. The questions were not long in coming.

"Did not Ivan Ogareff," asked the Czar, "return to Russia a second time, after that journey through the Siberian provinces, the object of which remains unknown?"

"He did."

"And have the police lost trace of him since?"

"No, sire; for an offender only becomes really dangerous from the day he has received his pardon."

The Czar frowned. Perhaps the chief of police feared that he had gone rather too far, though the stubbornness of his ideas was at least equal to the boundless devotion he felt for his master. But the Czar, disdaining to reply to these indirect reproaches cast on his policy, continued his questions. "Where was Ogareff last heard of?"

"In the province of Perm."

"In what town?"

"At Perm itself."

"What was he doing?"

"He appeared unoccupied, and there was nothing suspicious in his conduct."

"Then he was not under the surveillance of the secret police?"

"No, sire."

"When did he leave Perm?"

"About the month of March?"

"To go...?"

"Where, is unknown."

"And it is not known what has become of him?"

"No, sire; it is not known."

"Well, then, I myself know," answered the Czar. "I have received anonymous communications which did not pass through the police department; and, in the face of events now taking place beyond the frontier, I have every reason to believe that they are correct."

"Do you mean, sire," cried the chief of police, "that Ivan Ogareff has a hand in this Tartar rebellion?"

"Indeed I do; and I will now tell you something which you are ignorant of. After leaving Perm, Ivan Ogareff crossed the Ural mountains, entered Siberia, and penetrated the Kirghiz steppes, and there endeavored, not without success, to foment rebellion amongst their nomadic population.

He then went so far south as free Turkestan; there, in the provinces of Bokhara, Khokhand, and Koondooz, he found chiefs willing to pour their Tartar hordes into Siberia, and excite a general rising in Asiatic Russia. The storm has been silently gathering, but it has at last burst like a thunderclap, and now all means of communication between Eastern and Western Siberia have been stopped. Moreover, Ivan Ogareff, thirsting for vengeance, aims at the life of my brother!"

The Czar had become excited whilst speaking, and now paced up and down with hurried steps. The chief of police said nothing, but he thought to himself that, during the time when the emperors of Russia never pardoned an exile, schemes such as those of Ivan Ogareff could never have been realized. Approaching the Czar, who had thrown himself into an armchair, he asked, "Your majesty has of course given orders so that this rebellion may be suppressed as soon as possible?"

"Yes," answered the Czar. "The last telegram which reached Nijni-Udinsk would set in motion the troops in the governments of Yenisei, Irkutsk, Yakutsk, as well as those in the provinces of the Amoor and Lake Baikal. At the same time, the regiments from Perm and Nijni-Novgorod, and the Cossacks from the frontier, are advancing by forced marches towards the Ural Mountains; but some weeks must pass before they can attack the Tartars."

"And your majesty's brother, his Highness the Grand Duke, is now isolated in the government of Irkutsk, and is no longer in direct

communication with Moscow?"

"That is so."

"But by the last dispatches, he must know what measures have been taken by your majesty, and what help he may expect from the governments nearest Irkutsk?"

"He knows that," answered the Czar; "but what he does not know is, that Ivan Ogareff, as well as being a rebel, is also playing the part of a traitor, and that in him he has a personal and bitter enemy. It is to the Grand Duke that Ogareff owes his first disgrace; and what is more serious is, that this man is not known to him. Ogareff's plan, therefore, is to go to Irkutsk, and, under an assumed name, offer his services to the Grand Duke. Then, after gaining his confidence, when the Tartars have invested Irkutsk, he will betray the town, and with it my brother, whose life he seeks. This is what I have learned from my secret intelligence; this is what the Grand Duke does not know; and this is what he must know!"

"Well, sire, an intelligent, courageous courier..."

"I momentarily expect one."

"And it is to be hoped he will be expeditious," added the chief of police; "for, allow me to add, sire, that Siberia is a favorable land

for rebellions."

"Do you mean to say. General, that the exiles would make common cause with the rebels?" exclaimed the Czar.

"Excuse me, your majesty," stammered the chief of police, for that was really the idea suggested to him by his uneasy and suspicious mind.

"I believe in their patriotism," returned the Czar.

"There are other offenders besides political exiles in Siberia," said the chief of police.

"The criminals? Oh, General, I give those up to you! They are the vilest, I grant, of the human race. They belong to no country. But the insurrection, or rather, the rebellion, is not to oppose the emperor; it is raised against Russia, against the country which the exiles have not lost all hope of again seeing--and which they will see again. No, a Russian would never unite with a Tartar, to weaken, were it only for an hour, the Muscovite power!"

The Czar was right in trusting to the patriotism of those whom his policy kept, for a time, at a distance. Clemency, which was the foundation of his justice, when he could himself direct its effects, the modifications he had adopted with regard to applications for the formerly terrible ukases, warranted the belief that he was not mistaken.

But even without this powerful element of success in regard to the Tartar rebellion, circumstances were not the less very serious; for it was to be feared that a large part of the Kirghiz population would join the rebels.

The Kirghiz are divided into three hordes, the greater, the lesser, and the middle, and number nearly four hundred thousand "tents," or two million souls. Of the different tribes some are independent and others recognize either the sovereignty of Russia or that of the Khans of Khiva, Khokhand, and Bokhara, the most formidable chiefs of Turkestan. The middle horde, the richest, is also the largest, and its encampments occupy all the space between the rivers Sara Sou, Irtish, and the Upper Ishim, Lake Saisang and Lake Aksakal. The greater horde, occupying the countries situated to the east of the middle one, extends as far as the governments of Omsk and Tobolsk. Therefore, if the Kirghiz population should rise, it would be the rebellion of Asiatic Russia, and the first thing would be the separation of Siberia, to the east of the Yenisei.

It is true that these Kirghiz, mere novices in the art of war, are rather nocturnal thieves and plunderers of caravans than regular soldiers. As M. Levchine says, "a firm front or a square of good infantry could repel ten times the number of Kirghiz; and a single cannon might destroy a frightful number."

That may be; but to do this it is necessary for the square of good infantry to reach the rebellious country, and the cannon to leave the

arsenals of the Russian provinces, perhaps two or three thousand versts distant. Now, except by the direct route from Ekaterenburg to Irkutsk, the often marshy steppes are not easily practicable, and some weeks must certainly pass before the Russian troops could reach the Tartar hordes.

Omsk is the center of that military organization of Western Siberia which is intended to overawe the Kirghiz population. Here are the bounds, more than once infringed by the half-subdued nomads, and there was every reason to believe that Omsk was already in danger. The line of military stations, that is to say, those Cossack posts which are ranged in echelon from Omsk to Semipolatinsk, must have been broken in several places. Now, it was to be feared that the "Grand Sultans," who govern the Kirghiz districts would either voluntarily accept, or involuntarily submit to, the dominion of Tartars, Mussulmen like themselves, and that to the hate caused by slavery was not united the hate due to the antagonism of the Greek and Mussulman religions. For some time, indeed, the Tartars of Turkestan had endeavored, both by force and persuasion, to subdue the Kirghiz hordes.

A few words only with respect to these Tartars. The Tartars belong more especially to two distinct races, the Caucasian and the Mongolian. The Caucasian race, which, as Abel de Remusat says, "is regarded in Europe as the type of beauty in our species, because all the nations in this part of the world have sprung from it," includes also the Turks and the Persians. The purely Mongolian race comprises the Mongols, Manchoux, and Thibetans.

The Tartars who now threatened the Russian Empire, belonged to the Caucasian race, and occupied Turkestan. This immense country is divided into different states, governed by Khans, and hence termed Khanats. The principal khanats are those of Bokhara, Khokhand, Koondooz, etc. At this period, the most important and the most formidable khanat was that of Bokhara. Russia had already been several times at war with its chiefs, who, for their own interests, had supported the independence of the Kirghiz against the Muscovite dominion. The present chief, Feofar-Khan, followed in the steps of his predecessors.

The khanat of Bokhara has a population of two million five hundred thousand inhabitants, an army of sixty thousand men, trebled in time of war, and thirty thousand horsemen. It is a rich country, with varied animal, vegetable, and mineral products, and has been increased by the accession of the territories of Balkh, Aukoi, and Meimaneh. It possesses nineteen large towns. Bokhara, surrounded by a wall measuring more than eight English miles, and flanked with towers, a glorious city, made illustrious by Avicenna and other learned men of the tenth century, is regarded as the center of Mussulman science, and ranks among the most celebrated cities of Central Asia. Samarcand, which contains the tomb of Tamerlane and the famous palace where the blue stone is kept on which each new khan must seat himself on his accession, is defended by a very strong citadel. Karschi, with its triple cordon, situated in an oasis, surrounded by a marsh peopled with tortoises and lizards, is almost impregnable, Is-chardjoui is defended by a population of twenty thousand

souls. Protected by its mountains, and isolated by its steppes, the khanat of Bokhara is a most formidable state; and Russia would need a large force to subdue it.

The fierce and ambitious Feofar now governed this corner of Tartary. Relying on the other khans--principally those of Khokhand and Koondooz, cruel and rapacious warriors, all ready to join an enterprise so dear to Tartar instincts--aided by the chiefs who ruled all the hordes of Central Asia, he had placed himself at the head of the rebellion of which Ivan Ogareff was the instigator. This traitor, impelled by insane ambition as much as by hate, had ordered the movement so as to attack Siberia. Mad indeed he was, if he hoped to rupture the Muscovite Empire. Acting under his suggestion, the Emir--which is the title taken by the khans of Bokhara--had poured his hordes over the Russian frontier. He invaded the government of Semipolatinsk, and the Cossacks, who were only in small force there, had been obliged to retire before him. He had advanced farther than Lake Balkhash, gaining over the Kirghiz population on his way. Pillaging, ravaging, enrolling those who submitted, taking prisoners those who resisted, he marched from one town to another, followed by those impedimenta of Oriental sovereignty which may be called his household, his wives and his slaves--all with the cool audacity of a modern Ghengis-Khan. It was impossible to ascertain where he now was; how far his soldiers had marched before the news of the rebellion reached Moscow; or to what part of Siberia the Russian troops had been forced to retire. All communication was interrupted. Had the wire between Kolyvan and Tomsk been cut by Tartar scouts, or had the

Emir himself arrived at the Yeniseisk provinces? Was all the lower part of Western Siberia in a ferment? Had the rebellion already spread to the eastern regions? No one could say. The only agent which fears neither cold nor heat, which can neither be stopped by the rigors of winter nor the heat of summer, and which flies with the rapidity of lightning--the electric current--was prevented from traversing the steppes, and it was no longer possible to warn the Grand Duke, shut up in Irkutsk, of the danger threatening him from the treason of Ivan Ogareff.

A courier only could supply the place of the interrupted current. It would take this man some time to traverse the five thousand two hundred versts between Moscow and Irkutsk. To pass the ranks of the rebels and invaders he must display almost superhuman courage and intelligence. But with a clear head and a firm heart much can be done.

"Shall I be able to find this head and heart?" thought the Czar.

CHAPTER III MICHAEL STROGOFF MEETS THE CZAR

THE door of the imperial cabinet was again opened and General Kissoff was announced.

"The courier?" inquired the Czar eagerly.

"He is here, sire," replied General Kissoff.

"Have you found a fitting man?"

"I will answer for him to your majesty."

"Has he been in the service of the Palace?"

"Yes, sire."

"You know him?"

"Personally, and at various times he has fulfilled difficult missions with success."

"Abroad?"

"In Siberia itself."

"Where does he come from?"

"From Omsk. He is a Siberian."

"Has he coolness, intelligence, courage?"

"Yes, sire; he has all the qualities necessary to succeed, even where others might possibly fail."

"What is his age?"

"Thirty."

"Is he strong and vigorous?"

"Sire, he can bear cold, hunger, thirst, fatigue, to the very last extremities."

"He must have a frame of iron."

"Sire, he has."

"And a heart?"

"A heart of gold."

"His name?"

"Michael Strogoff."

"Is he ready to set out?"

"He awaits your majesty's orders in the guard-room."

"Let him come in," said the Czar.

In a few moments Michael Strogoff, the courier, entered the imperial library. He was a tall, vigorous, broad-shouldered, deep-chested man. His powerful head possessed the fine features of the Caucasian race. His well-knit frame seemed built for the performance of feats of strength. It would have been a difficult task to move such a man against his will, for when his feet were once planted on the ground, it was as if they had taken root. As he doffed his Muscovite cap, locks of thick curly hair fell over his broad, massive forehead. When his ordinarily pale face became at all flushed, it arose solely from a more rapid action of the heart. His eyes, of a deep blue, looked with clear, frank, firm gaze. The slightly-contracted eyebrows indicated lofty heroism--"the hero's cool courage," according to the definition of the physiologist. He possessed a fine nose, with large nostrils; and a well-shaped mouth, with the slightly-projecting lips which denote a generous and noble heart.

Michael Strogoff had the temperament of the man of action, who does not bite his nails or scratch his head in doubt and indecision. Sparing of gestures as of words, he always stood motionless like a soldier before his superior; but when he moved, his step showed a firmness, a freedom of movement, which proved the confidence and vivacity of his mind.

Michael Strogoff wore a handsome military uniform something resembling that of a light-cavalry officer in the field--boots, spurs, half tightly-fitting trousers, brown pelisse, trimmed with fur and ornamented with yellow braid. On his breast glittered a cross and several medals.

Michael Strogoff belonged to the special corps of the Czar's couriers, ranking as an officer among those picked men. His most discernible characteristic--particularly in his walk, his face, in the whole man, and which the Czar perceived at a glance--was, that he was "a fulfiller of orders." He therefore possessed one of the most serviceable qualities in Russia--one which, as the celebrated novelist Tourgueneff says, "will lead to the highest positions in the Muscovite empire."

In short, if anyone could accomplish this journey from Moscow to Irkutsk, across a rebellious country, surmount obstacles, and brave perils of all sorts, Michael Strogoff was the man.

A circumstance especially favorable to the success of his plan was, that he was thoroughly acquainted with the country which he was about to traverse, and understood its different dialects--not only from having

traveled there before, but because he was of Siberian origin.

His father--old Peter Strogoff, dead ten years since--inhabited the town of Omsk, situated in the government of the same name; and his mother, Marfa Strogoff, lived there still. There, amid the wild steppes of the provinces of Omsk and Tobolsk, had the famous huntsman brought up his son Michael to endure hardship. Peter Strogoff was a huntsman by profession. Summer and winter--in the burning heat, as well as when the cold was sometimes fifty degrees below zero--he scoured the frozen plains, the thickets of birch and larch, the pine forests; setting traps; watching for small game with his gun, and for large game with the spear or knife. The large game was nothing less than the Siberian bear, a formidable and ferocious animal, in size equaling its fellow of the frozen seas. Peter Strogoff had killed more than thirty-nine bears--that is to say, the fortieth had fallen under his blows; and, according to Russian legends, most huntsmen who have been lucky enough up to the thirty-ninth bear, have succumbed to the fortieth.

Peter Strogoff had, however, passed the fatal number without even a scratch. From that time, his son Michael, aged eleven years, never failed to accompany him to the hunt, carrying the ragatina or spear to aid his father, who was armed only with the knife. When he was fourteen, Michael Strogoff had killed his first bear, quite alone--that was nothing; but after stripping it he dragged the gigantic animal's skin to his father's house, many versts distant, exhibiting remarkable strength in a boy so young.

This style of life was of great benefit to him, and when he arrived at manhood he could bear any amount of cold, heat, hunger, thirst, or fatigue. Like the Yakout of the northern countries, he was made of iron. He could go four-and-twenty hours without eating, ten nights without sleeping, and could make himself a shelter in the open steppe where others would have been frozen to death. Gifted with marvelous acuteness, guided by the instinct of the Delaware of North America, over the white plain, when every object is hidden in mist, or even in higher latitudes, where the polar night is prolonged for many days, he could find his way when others would have had no idea whither to turn. All his father's secrets were known to him. He had learnt to read almost imperceptible signs--the forms of icicles, the appearance of the small branches of trees, mists rising far away in the horizon, vague sounds in the air, distant reports, the flight of birds through the foggy atmosphere, a thousand circumstances which are so many words to those who can decipher them. Moreover, tempered by snow like a Damascus blade in the waters of Syria, he had a frame of iron, as General Kissoff had said, and, what was no less true, a heart of gold.

The only sentiment of love felt by Michael Strogoff was that which he entertained for his mother, the aged Marfa, who could never be induced to leave the house of the Strogoffs, at Omsk, on the banks of the Irtish, where the old huntsman and she had lived so long together. When her son left her, he went away with a full heart, but promising to come and see her whenever he could possibly do so; and this promise he had

always religiously kept.

When Michael was twenty, it was decided that he should enter the personal service of the Emperor of Russia, in the corps of the couriers of the Czar. The hardy, intelligent, zealous, well-conducted young Siberian first distinguished himself especially, in a journey to the Caucasus, through the midst of a difficult country, ravaged by some restless successors of Schamyl; then later, in an important mission to Petropolowski, in Kamtschatka, the extreme limit of Asiatic Russia. During these long journeys he displayed such marvelous coolness, prudence, and courage, as to gain him the approbation and protection of his chiefs, who rapidly advanced him in his profession.

The furloughs which were his due after these distant missions, he never failed to devote to his old mother. Having been much employed in the south of the empire, he had not seen old Marfa for three years--three ages!--the first time in his life he had been so long absent from her. Now, however, in a few days he would obtain his furlough, and he had accordingly already made preparations for departure for Omsk, when the events which have been related occurred. Michael Strogoff was therefore introduced into the Czar's presence in complete ignorance of what the emperor expected from him.

The Czar fixed a penetrating look upon him without uttering a word, whilst Michael stood perfectly motionless.

The Czar, apparently satisfied with his scrutiny, motioned to the chief of police to seat himself, and dictated in a low voice a letter of not more than a few lines.

The letter penned, the Czar re-read it attentively, then signed it, preceding his name with the words "Byt po semou," which, signifying "So be it," constitutes the decisive formula of the Russian emperors.

The letter was then placed in an envelope, which was sealed with the imperial arms.

The Czar, rising, told Michael Strogoff to draw near.

Michael advanced a few steps, and then stood motionless, ready to answer.

The Czar again looked him full in the face and their eyes met. Then in an abrupt tone, "Thy name?" he asked.

"Michael Strogoff, sire."

"Thy rank?"

"Captain in the corps of couriers of the Czar."

"Thou dost know Siberia?"

"I am a Siberian."

"A native of?"

"Omsk, sire."

"Hast thou relations there?"

"Yes sire."

"What relations?"

"My old mother."

The Czar suspended his questions for a moment. Then, pointing to the letter which he held in his hand, "Here is a letter which I charge thee, Michael Strogoff, to deliver into the hands of the Grand Duke, and to no other but him."

"I will deliver it, sire."

"The Grand Duke is at Irkutsk."

"I will go to Irkutsk."

"Thou wilt have to traverse a rebellious country, invaded by Tartars, whose interest it will be to intercept this letter."

"I will traverse it."

"Above all, beware of the traitor, Ivan Ogareff, who will perhaps meet thee on the way."

"I will beware of him."

"Wilt thou pass through Omsk?"

"Sire, that is my route."

"If thou dost see thy mother, there will be the risk of being recognized. Thou must not see her!"

Michael Strogoff hesitated a moment.

"I will not see her," said he.

"Swear to me that nothing will make thee acknowledge who thou art, nor whither thou art going."

"I swear it."

"Michael Strogoff," continued the Czar, giving the letter to the young courier, "take this letter; on it depends the safety of all Siberia, and perhaps the life of my brother the Grand Duke."

"This letter shall be delivered to his Highness the Grand Duke."

"Then thou wilt pass whatever happens?"

"I shall pass, or they shall kill me."

"I want thee to live."

"I shall live, and I shall pass," answered Michael Strogoff.

The Czar appeared satisfied with Strogoff's calm and simple answer.

"Go then, Michael Strogoff," said he, "go for God, for Russia, for my brother, and for myself!"

The courier, having saluted his sovereign, immediately left the imperial cabinet, and, in a few minutes, the New Palace.

"You made a good choice there, General," said the Czar.

"I think so, sire," replied General Kissoff; "and your majesty may be sure that Michael Strogoff will do all that a man can do."

"He is indeed a man," said the Czar.

CHAPTER IV FROM MOSCOW TO NIJNI-NOVGOROD

THE distance between Moscow and Irkutsk, about to be traversed by Michael Strogoff, was three thousand four hundred miles. Before the telegraph wire extended from the Ural Mountains to the eastern frontier of Siberia, the dispatch service was performed by couriers, those who traveled the most rapidly taking eighteen days to get from Moscow to Irkutsk. But this was the exception, and the journey through Asiatic Russia usually occupied from four to five weeks, even though every available means of transport was placed at the disposal of the Czar's messengers.

Michael Strogoff was a man who feared neither frost nor snow. He would have preferred traveling during the severe winter season, in order that he might perform the whole distance by sleighs. At that period of the year the difficulties which all other means of locomotion present are greatly diminished, the wide steppes being leveled by snow, while there are no rivers to cross, but simply sheets of glass, over which the sleigh glides rapidly and easily.

Perhaps certain natural phenomena are most to be feared at that time, such as long-continuing and dense fogs, excessive cold, fearfully heavy snow-storms, which sometimes envelop whole caravans and cause their destruction. Hungry wolves also roam over the plain in thousands. But it would have been better for Michael Strogoff to face these risks; for during the winter the Tartar invaders would have been stationed in the

towns, any movement of their troops would have been impracticable, and he could consequently have more easily performed his journey. But it was not in his power to choose either weather or time. Whatever the circumstances, he must accept them and set out.

Such were the difficulties which Michael Strogoff boldly confronted and prepared to encounter.

In the first place, he must not travel as a courier of the Czar usually would. No one must even suspect what he really was. Spies swarm in a rebellious country; let him be recognized, and his mission would be in danger. Also, while supplying him with a large sum of money, which was sufficient for his journey, and would facilitate it in some measure, General Kissoff had not given him any document notifying that he was on the Emperor's service, which is the Sesame par excellence. He contented himself with furnishing him with a "podorojna."

This podorojna was made out in the name of Nicholas Korpanoff, merchant, living at Irkutsk. It authorized Nicholas Korpanoff to be accompanied by one or more persons, and, moreover, it was, by special notification, made available in the event of the Muscovite government forbidding natives of any other countries to leave Russia.

The podorojna is simply a permission to take post-horses; but Michael Strogoff was not to use it unless he was sure that by so doing he would not excite suspicion as to his mission, that is to say, whilst he was

on European territory. The consequence was that in Siberia, whilst traversing the insurgent provinces, he would have no power over the relays, either in the choice of horses in preference to others, or in demanding conveyances for his personal use; neither was Michael Strogoff to forget that he was no longer a courier, but a plain merchant, Nicholas Korpanoff, traveling from Moscow to Irkutsk, and, as such exposed to all the impediments of an ordinary journey.

To pass unknown, more or less rapidly, but to pass somehow, such were the directions he had received.

Thirty years previously, the escort of a traveler of rank consisted of not less than two hundred mounted Cossacks, two hundred foot-soldiers, twenty-five Baskir horsemen, three hundred camels, four hundred horses, twenty-five wagons, two portable boats, and two pieces of cannon. All this was requisite for a journey in Siberia.

Michael Strogoff, however, had neither cannon, nor horsemen, nor foot-soldiers, nor beasts of burden. He would travel in a carriage or on horseback, when he could; on foot, when he could not.

There would be no difficulty in getting over the first thousand miles, the distance between Moscow and the Russian frontier. Railroads, post-carriages, steamboats, relays of horses, were at everyone's disposal, and consequently at the disposal of the courier of the Czar.

Accordingly, on the morning of the 16th of July, having doffed his uniform, with a knapsack on his back, dressed in the simple Russian costume--tightly-fitting tunic, the traditional belt of the Moujik, wide trousers, gartered at the knees, and high boots--Michael Strogoff arrived at the station in time for the first train. He carried no arms, openly at least, but under his belt was hidden a revolver and in his pocket, one of those large knives, resembling both a cutlass and a yataghan, with which a Siberian hunter can so neatly disembowel a bear, without injuring its precious fur.

A crowd of travelers had collected at the Moscow station. The stations on the Russian railroads are much used as places for meeting, not only by those who are about to proceed by the train, but by friends who come to see them off. The station resembles, from the variety of characters assembled, a small news exchange.

The train in which Michael took his place was to set him down at Nijni-Novgorod. There terminated at that time, the iron road which, uniting Moscow and St. Petersburg, has since been continued to the Russian frontier. It was a journey of under three hundred miles, and the train would accomplish it in ten hours. Once arrived at Nijni-Novgorod, Strogoff would either take the land route or the steamer on the Volga, so as to reach the Ural Mountains as soon as possible.

Michael Strogoff ensconced himself in his corner, like a worthy citizen whose affairs go well with him, and who endeavors to kill time by sleep.

Nevertheless, as he was not alone in his compartment, he slept with one eye open, and listened with both his ears.

In fact, rumor of the rising of the Kirghiz hordes, and of the Tartar invasion had transpired in some degree. The occupants of the carriage, whom chance had made his traveling companions, discussed the subject, though with that caution which has become habitual among Russians, who know that spies are ever on the watch for any treasonable expressions which may be uttered.

These travelers, as well as the large number of persons in the train, were merchants on their way to the celebrated fair of Nijni-Novgorod;--a very mixed assembly, composed of Jews, Turks, Cossacks, Russians, Georgians, Kalmucks, and others, but nearly all speaking the national tongue.

They discussed the pros and cons of the serious events which were taking place beyond the Ural, and those merchants seemed to fear lest the government should be led to take certain restrictive measures, especially in the provinces bordering on the frontier--measures from which trade would certainly suffer. They apparently thought only of the struggle from the single point of view of their threatened interests. The presence of a private soldier, clad in his uniform--and the importance of a uniform in Russia is great--would have certainly been enough to restrain the merchants' tongues. But in the compartment occupied by Michael Strogoff, there was no one who seemed a military

man, and the Czar's courier was not the person to betray himself. He listened, then.

"They say that caravan teas are up," remarked a Persian, known by his cap of Astrakhan fur, and his ample brown robe, worn threadbare by use.

"Oh, there's no fear of teas falling," answered an old Jew of sullen aspect. "Those in the market at Nijni-Novgorod will be easily cleared off by the West; but, unfortunately, it won't be the same with Bokhara carpets."

"What! are you expecting goods from Bokhara?" asked the Persian.

"No, but from Samarcand, and that is even more exposed. The idea of reckoning on the exports of a country in which the khans are in a state of revolt from Khiva to the Chinese frontier!"

"Well," replied the Persian, "if the carpets do not arrive, the drafts will not arrive either, I suppose."

"And the profits, Father Abraham!" exclaimed the little Jew, "do you reckon them as nothing?"

"You are right," said another; "goods from Central Asia run a great risk in the market, and it will be the same with the tallow and shawls from the East."

"Why, look out, little father," said a Russian traveler, in a bantering tone; "you'll grease your shawls terribly if you mix them up with your tallow."

"That amuses you," sharply answered the merchant, who had little relish for that sort of joke.

"Well, if you tear your hair, or if you throw ashes on your head," replied the traveler, "will that change the course of events? No; no more than the course of the Exchange."

"One can easily see that you are not a merchant," observed the little Jew.

"Faith, no, worthy son of Abraham! I sell neither hops, nor eider-down, nor honey, nor wax, nor hemp-seed, nor salt meat, nor caviare, nor wood, nor wool, nor ribbons, nor, hemp, nor flax, nor morocco, nor furs."

"But do you buy them?" asked the Persian, interrupting the traveler's list.

"As little as I can, and only for my own private use," answered the other, with a wink.

"He's a wag," said the Jew to the Persian.

"Or a spy," replied the other, lowering his voice. "We had better take care, and not speak more than necessary. The police are not over-particular in these times, and you never can know with whom you are traveling."

In another corner of the compartment they were speaking less of mercantile affairs, and more of the Tartar invasion and its annoying consequences.

"All the horses in Siberia will be requisitioned," said a traveler, "and communication between the different provinces of Central Asia will become very difficult."

"Is it true," asked his neighbor, "that the Kirghiz of the middle horde have joined the Tartars?"

"So it is said," answered the traveler, lowering his voice; "but who can flatter themselves that they know anything really of what is going on in this country?"

"I have heard speak of a concentration of troops on the frontier. The Don Cossacks have already gathered along the course of the Volga, and they are to be opposed to the rebel Kirghiz."

"If the Kirghiz descend the Irtish, the route to Irkutsk will not be

safe," observed his neighbor. "Besides, yesterday I wanted to send a telegram to Krasnoiarsk, and it could not be forwarded. It's to be feared that before long the Tartar columns will have isolated Eastern Siberia."

"In short, little father," continued the first speaker, "these merchants have good reason for being uneasy about their trade and transactions. After requisitioning the horses, they will take the boats, carriages, every means of transport, until presently no one will be allowed to take even one step in all the empire."

"I'm much afraid that the Nijni-Novgorod fair won't end as brilliantly as it has begun," responded the other, shaking his head. "But the safety and integrity of the Russian territory before everything. Business is business."

If in this compartment the subject of conversation varied but little--nor did it, indeed, in the other carriages of the train--in all it might have been observed that the talkers used much circumspection. When they did happen to venture out of the region of facts, they never went so far as to attempt to divine the intentions of the Muscovite government, or even to criticize them.

This was especially remarked by a traveler in a carriage at the front part of the train. This person--evidently a stranger--made good use of his eyes, and asked numberless questions, to which he received only

evasive answers. Every minute leaning out of the window, which he would keep down, to the great disgust of his fellow-travelers, he lost nothing of the views to the right. He inquired the names of the most insignificant places, their position, what were their commerce, their manufactures, the number of their inhabitants, the average mortality, etc., and all this he wrote down in a note-book, already full.

This was the correspondent Alcide Jolivet, and the reason of his putting so many insignificant questions was, that amongst the many answers he received, he hoped to find some interesting fact "for his cousin." But, naturally enough, he was taken for a spy, and not a word treating of the events of the day was uttered in his hearing.

Finding, therefore, that he could learn nothing of the Tartar invasion, he wrote in his book, "Travelers of great discretion. Very close as to political matters."

Whilst Alcide Jolivet noted down his impressions thus minutely, his confrere, in the same train, traveling for the same object, was devoting himself to the same work of observation in another compartment. Neither of them had seen each other that day at the Moscow station, and they were each ignorant that the other had set out to visit the scene of the war. Harry Blount, speaking little, but listening much, had not inspired his companions with the suspicions which Alcide Jolivet had aroused. He was not taken for a spy, and therefore his neighbors, without constraint, gossiped in his presence, allowing themselves even to go

farther than their natural caution would in most cases have allowed them. The correspondent of the Daily Telegraph had thus an opportunity of observing how much recent events preoccupied the merchants of Nijni-Novgorod, and to what a degree the commerce with Central Asia was threatened in its transit.

He therefore noted in his book this perfectly correct observation, "My fellow-travelers extremely anxious. Nothing is talked of but war, and they speak of it, with a freedom which is astonishing, as having broken out between the Volga and the Vistula."

The readers of the Daily Telegraph would not fail to be as well informed as Alcide Jolivet's "cousin." But as Harry Blount, seated at the left of the train, only saw one part of the country, which was hilly, without giving himself the trouble of looking at the right side, which was composed of wide plains, he added, with British assurance, "Country mountainous between Moscow and Wladimir."

It was evident that the Russian government purposed taking severe measures to guard against any serious eventualities even in the interior of the empire. The rebel lion had not crossed the Siberian frontier, but evil influences might be feared in the Volga provinces, so near to the country of the Kirghiz.

The police had as yet found no traces of Ivan Ogareff. It was not known whether the traitor, calling in the foreigner to avenge his personal

rancor, had rejoined Feofar-Khan, or whether he was endeavoring to foment a revolt in the government of Nijni-Novgorod, which at this time of year contained a population of such diverse elements. Perhaps among the Persians, Armenians, or Kalmucks, who flocked to the great market, he had agents, instructed to provoke a rising in the interior. All this was possible, especially in such a country as Russia. In fact, this vast empire, 4,000,000 square miles in extent, does not possess the homogeneousness of the states of Western Europe. The Russian territory in Europe and Asia contains more than seventy millions of inhabitants. In it thirty different languages are spoken. The Sclavonian race predominates, no doubt, but there are besides Russians, Poles, Lithuanians, Courlanders. Add to these, Finns, Laplanders, Esthonians, several other northern tribes with unpronounceable names, the Permiaks, the Germans, the Greeks, the Tartars, the Caucasian tribes, the Mongol, Kalmuck, Samoid, Kamtschatkan, and Aleutian hordes, and one may understand that the unity of so vast a state must be difficult to maintain, and that it could only be the work of time, aided by the wisdom of many successive rulers.

Be that as it may, Ivan Ogareff had hitherto managed to escape all search, and very probably he might have rejoined the Tartar army. But at every station where the train stopped, inspectors came forward who scrutinized the travelers and subjected them all to a minute examination, as by order of the superintendent of police, these officials were seeking Ivan Ogareff. The government, in fact, believed it to be certain that the traitor had not yet been able to quit European

Russia. If there appeared cause to suspect any traveler, he was carried off to explain himself at the police station, and in the meantime the train went on its way, no person troubling himself about the unfortunate one left behind.

With the Russian police, which is very arbitrary, it is absolutely useless to argue. Military rank is conferred on its employees, and they act in military fashion. How can anyone, moreover, help obeying, unhesitatingly, orders which emanate from a monarch who has the right to employ this formula at the head of his ukase: "We, by the grace of God, Emperor and Autocrat of all the Russias of Moscow, Kiev, Wladimir, and Novgorod, Czar of Kasan and Astrakhan, Czar of Poland, Czar of Siberia, Czar of the Tauric Chersonese, Seignior of Pskov, Prince of Smolensk, Lithuania, Volkynia, Podolia, and Finland, Prince of Esthonia, Livonia, Courland, and of Semigallia, of Bialystok, Karelia, Sougria, Perm, Viatka, Bulgaria, and many other countries; Lord and Sovereign Prince of the territory of Nijni-Novgorod, Tchemigoff, Riazan, Polotsk, Rostov, Jaroslavl, Bielozersk, Oudoria, Obdoria, Kondinia, Vitepsk, and of Mstislaf, Governor of the Hyperborean Regions, Lord of the countries of Iveria, Kartalinia, Grou-zinia, Kabardinia, and Armenia, Hereditary Lord and Suzerain of the Scherkess princes, of those of the mountains, and of others; heir of Norway, Duke of Schleswig-Holstein, Stormarn, Dittmarsen, and Oldenburg." A powerful lord, in truth, is he whose arms are an eagle with two heads, holding a scepter and a globe, surrounded by the escutcheons of Novgorod, Wladimir, Kiev, Kasan, Astrakhan, and of Siberia, and environed by the collar of the order of St. Andrew,

surmounted by a royal crown!

As to Michael Strogoff, his papers were in order, and he was, consequently, free from all police supervision.

At the station of Wladimir the train stopped for several minutes, which appeared sufficient to enable the correspondent of the Daily Telegraph to take a twofold view, physical and moral, and to form a complete estimate of this ancient capital of Russia.

At the Wladimir station fresh travelers joined the train. Among others, a young girl entered the compartment occupied by Michael Strogoff. A vacant place was found opposite the courier. The young girl took it, after placing by her side a modest traveling-bag of red leather, which seemed to constitute all her luggage. Then seating herself with downcast eyes, not even glancing at the fellow-travelers whom chance had given her, she prepared for a journey which was still to last several hours.

Michael Strogoff could not help looking attentively at his newly-arrived fellow-traveler. As she was so placed as to travel with her back to the engine, he even offered her his seat, which he might prefer to her own, but she thanked him with a slight bend of her graceful neck.

The young girl appeared to be about sixteen or seventeen years of age. Her head, truly charming, was of the purest Sclavonic type--slightly severe, and likely in a few summers to unfold into beauty rather than

mere prettiness. From beneath a sort of kerchief which she wore on her head escaped in profusion light golden hair. Her eyes were brown, soft, and expressive of much sweetness of temper. The nose was straight, and attached to her pale and somewhat thin cheeks by delicately mobile nostrils. The lips were finely cut, but it seemed as if they had long since forgotten how to smile.

The young traveler was tall and upright, as far as could be judged of her figure from the very simple and ample pelisse that covered her. Although she was still a very young girl in the literal sense of the term, the development of her high forehead and clearly-cut features gave the idea that she was the possessor of great moral energy--a point which did not escape Michael Strogoff. Evidently this young girl had already suffered in the past, and the future doubtless did not present itself to her in glowing colors; but she had surely known how to struggle still with the trials of life. Her energy was evidently both prompt and persistent, and her calmness unalterable, even under circumstances in which a man would be likely to give way or lose his self-command.

Such was the impression which she produced at first sight. Michael Strogoff, being himself of an energetic temperament, was naturally struck by the character of her physiognomy, and, while taking care not to cause her annoyance by a too persistent gaze, he observed his neighbor with no small interest. The costume of the young traveler was both extremely simple and appropriate. She was not rich--that could be easily seen; but not the slightest mark of negligence was to be

discerned in her dress. All her luggage was contained in the leather bag which, for want of room, she held on her lap.

She wore a long, dark pelisse, gracefully adjusted at the neck by a blue tie. Under this pelisse, a short skirt, also dark, fell over a robe which reached the ankles. Half-boots of leather, thickly soled, as if chosen in anticipation of a long journey, covered her small feet.

Michael Strogoff fancied that he recognized, by certain details, the fashion of the costume of Livonia, and thought his neighbor a native of the Baltic provinces.

But whither was this young girl going, alone, at an age when the fostering care of a father, or the protection of a brother, is considered a matter of necessity? Had she now come, after an already long journey, from the provinces of Western Russia? Was she merely going to Nijni-Novgorod, or was the end of her travels beyond the eastern frontiers of the empire? Would some relation, some friend, await her arrival by the train? Or was it not more probable, on the contrary, that she would find herself as much isolated in the town as she was in this compartment? It was probable.

In fact, the effect of habits contracted in solitude was clearly manifested in the bearing of the young girl. The manner in which she entered the carriage and prepared herself for the journey, the slight disturbance she caused among those around her, the care she took not to

incommode or give trouble to anyone, all showed that she was accustomed to be alone, and to depend on herself only.

Michael Strogoff observed her with interest, but, himself reserved, he sought no opportunity of accosting her. Once only, when her neighbor--the merchant who had jumbled together so imprudently in his remarks tallow and shawls--being asleep, and threatening her with his great head, which was swaying from one shoulder to the other, Michael Strogoff awoke him somewhat roughly, and made him understand that he must hold himself upright.

The merchant, rude enough by nature, grumbled some words against "people who interfere with what does not concern them," but Michael Strogoff cast on him a glance so stern that the sleeper leant on the opposite side, and relieved the young traveler from his unpleasant vicinity.

The latter looked at the young man for an instant, and mute and modest thanks were in that look.

But a circumstance occurred which gave Strogoff a just idea of the character of the maiden. Twelve versts before arriving at Nijni-Novgorod, at a sharp curve of the iron way, the train experienced a very violent shock. Then, for a minute, it ran onto the slope of an embankment.

Travelers more or less shaken about, cries, confusion, general disorder

in the carriages--such was the effect at first produced. It was to be feared that some serious accident had happened. Consequently, even before the train had stopped, the doors were opened, and the panic-stricken passengers thought only of getting out of the carriages.

Michael Strogoff thought instantly of the young girl; but, while the passengers in her compartment were precipitating themselves outside, screaming and struggling, she had remained quietly in her place, her face scarcely changed by a slight pallor.

She waited--Michael Strogoff waited also.

Both remained quiet.

"A determined nature!" thought Michael Strogoff.

However, all danger had quickly disappeared. A breakage of the coupling of the luggage-van had first caused the shock to, and then the stoppage of, the train, which in another instant would have been thrown from the top of the embankment into a bog. There was an hour's delay. At last, the road being cleared, the train proceeded, and at half-past eight in the evening arrived at the station of Nijni-Novgorod.

Before anyone could get out of the carriages, the inspectors of police

presented themselves at the doors and examined the passengers.

Michael Strogoff showed his podorojna, made out in the name of Nicholas Korpanoff. He had consequently no difficulty. As to the other travelers in the compartment, all bound for Nijni-Novgorod, their appearance, happily for them, was in nowise suspicious.

The young girl in her turn, exhibited, not a passport, since passports are no longer required in Russia, but a permit indorsed with a private seal, and which seemed to be of a special character. The inspector read the permit with attention. Then, having attentively examined the person whose description it contained:

"You are from Riga?" he said.

"Yes," replied the young girl.

"You are going to Irkutsk?"

"Yes."

"By what route?"

"By Perm."

"Good!" replied the inspector. "Take care to have your permit vised, at

the police station of Nijni-Novgorod."

The young girl bent her head in token of assent.

Hearing these questions and replies, Michael Strogoff experienced a mingled sentiment both of surprise and pity. What! this young girl, alone, journeying to that far-off Siberia, and at a time when, to its ordinary dangers, were added all the perils of an invaded country and one in a state of insurrection! How would she reach it? What would become of her?

The inspection ended, the doors of the carriages were then opened, but, before Michael Strogoff could move towards her, the young Livonian, who had been the first to descend, had disappeared in the crowd which thronged the platforms of the railway station.

CHAPTER V THE TWO ANNOUNCEMENTS

NIJNI-NOVGOROD, Lower Novgorod, situate at the junction of the Volga and the Oka, is the chief town in the district of the same name. It was here that Michael Strogoff was obliged to leave the railway, which at the time did not go beyond that town. Thus, as he advanced, his traveling would become first less speedy and then less safe.

Nijni-Novgorod, the fixed population of which is only from thirty to thirty-five thousand inhabitants, contained at that time more than three hundred thousand; that is to say, the population was increased tenfold. This addition was in consequence of the celebrated fair, which was held within the walls for three weeks. Formerly Makariew had the benefit of this concourse of traders, but since 1817 the fair had been removed to Nijni-Novgorod.

Even at the late hour at which Michael Strogoff left the platform, there was still a large number of people in the two towns, separated by the stream of the Volga, which compose Nijni-Novgorod. The highest of these is built on a steep rock, and defended by a fort called in Russia "kreml."

Michael Strogoff expected some trouble in finding a hotel, or even an inn, to suit him. As he had not to start immediately, for he was going to take a steamer, he was compelled to look out for some lodging; but, before doing so, he wished to know exactly the hour at which the

steamboat would start. He went to the office of the company whose boats plied between Nijni-Novgorod and Perm. There, to his great annoyance, he found that no boat started for Perm till the following day at twelve o'clock. Seventeen hours to wait! It was very vexatious to a man so pressed for time. However, he never senselessly murmured. Besides, the fact was that no other conveyance could take him so quickly either to Perm or Kasan. It would be better, then, to wait for the steamer, which would enable him to regain lost time.

Here, then, was Michael Strogoff, strolling through the town and quietly looking out for some inn in which to pass the night. However, he troubled himself little on this score, and, but that hunger pressed him, he would probably have wandered on till morning in the streets of Nijni-Novgorod. He was looking for supper rather than a bed. But he found both at the sign of the City of Constantinople. There, the landlord offered him a fairly comfortable room, with little furniture, it is true, but not without an image of the Virgin, and a few saints framed in yellow gauze.

A goose filled with sour stuffing swimming in thick cream, barley bread, some curds, powdered sugar mixed with cinnamon, and a jug of kwass, the ordinary Russian beer, were placed before him, and sufficed to satisfy his hunger. He did justice to the meal, which was more than could be said of his neighbor at table, who, having, in his character of "old believer" of the sect of Raskalniks, made the vow of abstinence, rejected the potatoes in front of him, and carefully refrained from

putting sugar in his tea.

His supper finished, Michael Strogoff, instead of going up to his bedroom, again strolled out into the town. But, although the long twilight yet lingered, the crowd was already dispersing, the streets were gradually becoming empty, and at length everyone retired to his dwelling.

Why did not Michael Strogoff go quietly to bed, as would have seemed more reasonable after a long railway journey? Was he thinking of the young Livonian girl who had been his traveling companion? Having nothing better to do, he WAS thinking of her. Did he fear that, lost in this busy city, she might be exposed to insult? He feared so, and with good reason. Did he hope to meet her, and, if need were, to afford her protection? No. To meet would be difficult. As to protection--what right had he--

"Alone," he said to himself, "alone, in the midst of these wandering tribes! And yet the present dangers are nothing compared to those she must undergo. Siberia! Irkutsk! I am about to dare all risks for Russia, for the Czar, while she is about to do so--For whom? For what? She is authorized to cross the frontier! The country beyond is in revolt! The steppes are full of Tartar bands!"

Michael Strogoff stopped for an instant, and reflected.

"Without doubt," thought he, "she must have determined on undertaking her journey before the invasion. Perhaps she is even now ignorant of what is happening. But no, that cannot be; the merchants discussed before her the disturbances in Siberia--and she did not seem surprised. She did not even ask an explanation. She must have known it then, and knowing it, is still resolute. Poor girl! Her motive for the journey must be urgent indeed! But though she may be brave--and she certainly is so--her strength must fail her, and, to say nothing of dangers and obstacles, she will be unable to endure the fatigue of such a journey. Never can she reach Irkutsk!"

Indulging in such reflections, Michael Strogoff wandered on as chance led him; being well acquainted with the town, he knew that he could easily retrace his steps.

Having strolled on for about an hour, he seated himself on a bench against the wall of a large wooden cottage, which stood, with many others, on a vast open space. He had scarcely been there five minutes when a hand was laid heavily on his shoulder.

"What are you doing here?" roughly demanded a tall and powerful man, who had approached unperceived.

"I am resting," replied Michael Strogoff.

"Do you mean to stay all night on the bench?"

"Yes, if I feel inclined to do so," answered Michael Strogoff, in a tone somewhat too sharp for the simple merchant he wished to personate.

"Come forward, then, so I can see you," said the man.

Michael Strogoff, remembering that, above all, prudence was requisite, instinctively drew back. "It is not necessary," he replied, and calmly stepped back ten paces.

The man seemed, as Michael observed him well, to have the look of a Bohemian, such as are met at fairs, and with whom contact, either physical or moral, is unpleasant. Then, as he looked more attentively through the dusk, he perceived, near the cottage, a large caravan, the usual traveling dwelling of the Zingaris or gypsies, who swarm in Russia wherever a few copecks can be obtained.

As the gypsy took two or three steps forward, and was about to interrogate Michael Strogoff more closely, the door of the cottage opened. He could just see a woman, who spoke quickly in a language which Michael Strogoff knew to be a mixture of Mongol and Siberian.

"Another spy! Let him alone, and come to supper. The papluka is waiting for you."

Michael Strogoff could not help smiling at the epithet bestowed on him,

dreading spies as he did above all else.

In the same dialect, although his accent was very different, the Bohemian replied in words which signify, "You are right, Sangarre! Besides, we start to-morrow."

"To-morrow?" repeated the woman in surprise.

"Yes, Sangarre," replied the Bohemian; "to-morrow, and the Father himself sends us--where we are going!"

Thereupon the man and woman entered the cottage, and carefully closed the door.

"Good!" said Michael Strogoff, to himself; "if these gipsies do not wish to be understood when they speak before me, they had better use some other language."

From his Siberian origin, and because he had passed his childhood in the Steppes, Michael Strogoff, it has been said, understood almost all the languages in usage from Tartary to the Sea of Ice. As to the exact signification of the words he had heard, he did not trouble his head. For why should it interest him?

It was already late when he thought of returning to his inn to take some repose. He followed, as he did so, the course of the Volga, whose waters

were almost hidden under the countless number of boats floating on its bosom.

An hour after, Michael Strogoff was sleeping soundly on one of those Russian beds which always seem so hard to strangers, and on the morrow, the 17th of July, he awoke at break of day.

He had still five hours to pass in Nijni-Novgorod; it seemed to him an age. How was he to spend the morning unless in wandering, as he had done the evening before, through the streets? By the time he had finished his breakfast, strapped up his bag, had his podorojna inspected at the police office, he would have nothing to do but start. But he was not a man to lie in bed after the sun had risen; so he rose, dressed himself, placed the letter with the imperial arms on it carefully at the bottom of its usual pocket within the lining of his coat, over which he fastened his belt; he then closed his bag and threw it over his shoulder. This done, he had no wish to return to the City of Constantinople, and intending to breakfast on the bank of the Volga near the wharf, he settled his bill and left the inn. By way of precaution, Michael Strogoff went first to the office of the steam-packet company, and there made sure that the Caucasus would start at the appointed hour. As he did so, the thought for the first time struck him that, since the young Livonian girl was going to Perm, it was very possible that her intention was also to embark in the Caucasus, in which case he should accompany her.

The town above with its kremlin, whose circumference measures two versts, and which resembles that of Moscow, was altogether abandoned. Even the governor did not reside there. But if the town above was like a city of the dead, the town below, at all events, was alive.

Michael Strogoff, having crossed the Volga on a bridge of boats, guarded by mounted Cossacks, reached the square where the evening before he had fallen in with the gipsy camp. This was somewhat outside the town, where the fair of Nijni-Novgorod was held. In a vast plain rose the temporary palace of the governor-general, where by imperial orders that great functionary resided during the whole of the fair, which, thanks to the people who composed it, required an ever-watchful surveillance.

This plain was now covered with booths symmetrically arranged in such a manner as to leave avenues broad enough to allow the crowd to pass without a crush.

Each group of these booths, of all sizes and shapes, formed a separate quarter particularly dedicated to some special branch of commerce. There was the iron quarter, the furriers' quarter, the woolen quarter, the quarter of the wood merchants, the weavers' quarter, the dried fish quarter, etc. Some booths were even built of fancy materials, some of bricks of tea, others of masses of salt meat--that is to say, of samples of the goods which the owners thus announced were there to the purchasers--a singular, and somewhat American, mode of advertisement.

In the avenues and long alleys there was already a large assemblage of people--the sun, which had risen at four o'clock, being well above the horizon--an extraordinary mixture of Europeans and Asiatics, talking, wrangling, haranguing, and bargaining. Everything which can be bought or sold seemed to be heaped up in this square. Furs, precious stones, silks, Cashmere shawls, Turkey carpets, weapons from the Caucasus, gauzes from Smyrna and Ispahan. Tiflis armor, caravan teas. European bronzes, Swiss clocks, velvets and silks from Lyons, English cottons, harness, fruits, vegetables, minerals from the Ural, malachite, lapis-lazuli, spices, perfumes, medicinal herbs, wood, tar, rope, horn, pumpkins, water-melons, etc--all the products of India, China, Persia, from the shores of the Caspian and the Black Sea, from America and Europe, were united at this corner of the globe.

It is scarcely possible truly to portray the moving mass of human beings surging here and there, the excitement, the confusion, the hubbub; demonstrative as were the natives and the inferior classes, they were completely outdone by their visitors. There were merchants from Central Asia, who had occupied a year in escorting their merchandise across its vast plains, and who would not again see their shops and counting-houses for another year to come. In short, of such importance is this fair of Nijni-Novgorod, that the sum total of its transactions amounts yearly to nearly a hundred million dollars.

On one of the open spaces between the quarters of this temporary city were numbers of mountebanks of every description; gypsies from the

mountains, telling fortunes to the credulous fools who are ever to be found in such assemblies; Zingaris or Tsiganes--a name which the Russians give to the gypsies who are the descendants of the ancient Copts--singing their wildest melodies and dancing their most original dances; comedians of foreign theaters, acting Shakespeare, adapted to the taste of spectators who crowded to witness them. In the long avenues the bear showmen accompanied their four-footed dancers, menageries resounded with the hoarse cries of animals under the influence of the stinging whip or red-hot irons of the tamer; and, besides all these numberless performers, in the middle of the central square, surrounded by a circle four deep of enthusiastic amateurs, was a band of "mariners of the Volga," sitting on the ground, as on the deck of their vessel, imitating the action of rowing, guided by the stick of the master of the orchestra, the veritable helmsman of this imaginary vessel! A whimsical and pleasing custom!

Suddenly, according to a time-honored observance in the fair of Nijni-Novgorod, above the heads of the vast concourse a flock of birds was allowed to escape from the cages in which they had been brought to the spot. In return for a few copecks charitably offered by some good people, the bird-fanciers opened the prison doors of their captives, who flew out in hundreds, uttering their joyous notes.

It should be mentioned that England and France, at all events, were this year represented at the great fair of Nijni-Novgorod by two of the most distinguished products of modern civilization, Messrs. Harry Blount

and Alcide Jolivet. Jolivet, an optimist by nature, found everything agreeable, and as by chance both lodging and food were to his taste, he jotted down in his book some memoranda particularly favorable to the town of Nijni-Novgorod. Blount, on the contrary, having in vain hunted for a supper, had been obliged to find a resting-place in the open air. He therefore looked at it all from another point of view, and was preparing an article of the most withering character against a town in which the landlords of the inns refused to receive travelers who only begged leave to be flayed, "morally and physically."

Michael Strogoff, one hand in his pocket, the other holding his cherry-stemmed pipe, appeared the most indifferent and least impatient of men; yet, from a certain contraction of his eyebrows every now and then, a careful observer would have seen that he was burning to be off.

For two hours he kept walking about the streets, only to find himself invariably at the fair again. As he passed among the groups of buyers and sellers he discovered that those who came from countries on the confines of Asia manifested great uneasiness. Their trade was visibly suffering. Another symptom also was marked. In Russia military uniforms appear on every occasion. Soldiers are wont to mix freely with the crowd, the police agents being almost invariably aided by a number of Cossacks, who, lance on shoulder, keep order in the crowd of three hundred thousand strangers. But on this occasion the soldiers, Cossacks and the rest, did not put in an appearance at the great market. Doubtless, a sudden order to move having been foreseen, they were

restricted to their barracks.

Moreover, while no soldiers were to be seen, it was not so with their officers. Since the evening before, aides-decamp, leaving the governor's palace, galloped in every direction. An unusual movement was going forward which a serious state of affairs could alone account for. There were innumerable couriers on the roads both to Wladimir and to the Ural Mountains. The exchange of telegraphic dispatches with Moscow was incessant.

Michael Strogoff found himself in the central square when the report spread that the head of police had been summoned by a courier to the palace of the governor-general. An important dispatch from Moscow, it was said, was the cause of it.

"The fair is to be closed," said one.

"The regiment of Nijni-Novgorod has received the route," declared another.

"They say that the Tartars menace Tomsk!"

"Here is the head of police!" was shouted on every side. A loud clapping of hands was suddenly raised, which subsided by degrees, and finally was succeeded by absolute silence. The head of police arrived in the middle of the central square, and it was seen by all that he held in his hand a

dispatch.

Then, in a loud voice, he read the following announcements: "By order of the Governor of Nijni-Novgorod.

"1st. All Russian subjects are forbidden to quit the province upon any pretext whatsoever.

"2nd. All strangers of Asiatic origin are commanded to leave the province within twenty-four hours."

CHAPTER VI BROTHER AND SISTER

HOWEVER disastrous these measures might be to private interests, they were, under the circumstances, perfectly justifiable.

"All Russian subjects are forbidden to leave the province;" if Ivan Ogareff was still in the province, this would at any rate prevent him, unless with the greatest difficulty, from rejoining Feofar-Khan, and becoming a very formidable lieutenant to the Tartar chief.

"All foreigners of Asiatic origin are ordered to leave the province in four-and-twenty hours;" this would send off in a body all the traders from Central Asia, as well as the bands of Bohemians, gipsies, etc., having more or less sympathy with the Tartars. So many heads, so many spies--undoubtedly affairs required their expulsion.

It is easy to understand the effect produced by these two thunder-claps bursting over a town like Nijni-Novgorod, so densely crowded with visitors, and with a commerce so greatly surpassing that of all other places in Russia. The natives whom business called beyond the Siberian frontier could not leave the province for a time at least. The tenor of the first article of the order was express; it admitted of no exception. All private interests must yield to the public weal. As to the second article of the proclamation, the order of expulsion which it contained admitted of no evasion either. It only concerned foreigners of Asiatic origin, but these could do nothing but pack up their merchandise and

go back the way they came. As to the mountebanks, of which there were a considerable number, they had nearly a thousand versts to go before they could reach the nearest frontier. For them it was simply misery.

At first there rose against this unusual measure a murmur of protestation, a cry of despair, but this was quickly suppressed by the presence of the Cossacks and agents of police. Immediately, what might be called the exodus from the immense plain began. The awnings in front of the stalls were folded up; the theaters were taken to pieces; the fires were put out; the acrobats' ropes were lowered; the old broken-winded horses of the traveling vans came back from their sheds. Agents and soldiers with whip or stick stimulated the tardy ones, and made nothing of pulling down the tents even before the poor Bohemians had left them.

Under these energetic measures the square of Nijni-Novgorod would, it was evident, be entirely evacuated before the evening, and to the tumult of the great fair would succeed the silence of the desert.

It must again be repeated--for it was a necessary aggravation of these severe measures--that to all those nomads chiefly concerned in the order of expulsion even the steppes of Siberia were forbidden, and they would be obliged to hasten to the south of the Caspian Sea, either to Persia, Turkey, or the plains of Turkestan. The post of the Ural, and the mountains which form, as it were, a prolongation of the river along the Russian frontier, they were not allowed to pass. They were therefore

under the necessity of traveling six hundred miles before they could tread a free soil.

Just as the reading of the proclamation by the head of the police came to an end, an idea darted instinctively into the mind of Michael Strogoff. "What a singular coincidence," thought he, "between this proclamation expelling all foreigners of Asiatic origin, and the words exchanged last evening between those two gipsies of the Zingari race. 'The Father himself sends us where we wish to go,' that old man said. But 'the Father' is the emperor! He is never called anything else among the people. How could those gipsies have foreseen the measure taken against them? how could they have known it beforehand, and where do they wish to go? Those are suspicious people, and it seems to me that to them the government proclamation must be more useful than injurious."

But these reflections were completely dispelled by another which drove every other thought out of Michael's mind. He forgot the Zingaris, their suspicious words, the strange coincidence which resulted from the proclamation. The remembrance of the young Livonian girl suddenly rushed into his mind. "Poor child!" he thought to himself. "She cannot now cross the frontier."

In truth the young girl was from Riga; she was Livonian, consequently Russian, and now could not leave Russian territory! The permit which had been given her before the new measures had been promulgated was no longer available. All the routes to Siberia had just been pitilessly

closed to her, and, whatever the motive taking her to Irkutsk, she was now forbidden to go there.

This thought greatly occupied Michael Strogoff. He said to himself, vaguely at first, that, without neglecting anything of what was due to his important mission, it would perhaps be possible for him to be of some use to this brave girl; and this idea pleased him. Knowing how serious were the dangers which he, an energetic and vigorous man, would have personally to encounter, he could not conceal from himself how infinitely greater they would prove to a young unprotected girl. As she was going to Irkutsk, she would be obliged to follow the same road as himself, she would have to pass through the bands of invaders, as he was about to attempt doing himself. If, moreover, she had at her disposal only the money necessary for a journey taken under ordinary circumstances, how could she manage to accomplish it under conditions which made it not only perilous but expensive?

"Well," said he, "if she takes the route to Perm, it is nearly impossible but that I shall fall in with her. Then, I will watch over her without her suspecting it; and as she appears to me as anxious as myself to reach Irkutsk, she will cause me no delay."

But one thought leads to another. Michael Strogoff had till now thought only of doing a kind action; but now another idea flashed into his brain; the question presented itself under quite a new aspect.

"The fact is," said he to himself, "that I have much more need of her than she can have of me. Her presence will be useful in drawing off suspicion from me. A man traveling alone across the steppe, may be easily guessed to be a courier of the Czar. If, on the contrary, this young girl accompanies me, I shall appear, in the eyes of all, the Nicholas Korpanoff of my podorojna. Therefore, she must accompany me. Therefore, I must find her again at any cost. It is not probable that since yesterday evening she has been able to get a carriage and leave Nijni-Novgorod. I must look for her. And may God guide me!"

Michael left the great square of Nijni-Novgorod, where the tumult produced by the carrying out of the prescribed measures had now reached its height. Recriminations from the banished strangers, shouts from the agents and Cossacks who were using them so brutally, together made an indescribable uproar. The girl for whom he searched could not be there. It was now nine o'clock in the morning. The steamboat did not start till twelve. Michael Strogoff had therefore nearly two hours to employ in searching for her whom he wished to make his traveling companion.

He crossed the Volga again and hunted through the quarters on the other side, where the crowd was much less considerable. He entered the churches, the natural refuge for all who weep, for all who suffer. Nowhere did he meet with the young Livonian.

"And yet," he repeated, "she could not have left Nijni-Novgorod yet. We'll have another look." He wandered about thus for two hours. He went

on without stopping, feeling no fatigue, obeying a potent instinct which allowed no room for thought. All was in vain.

It then occurred to him that perhaps the girl had not heard of the order--though this was improbable enough, for such a thunder-clap could not have burst without being heard by all. Evidently interested in knowing the smallest news from Siberia, how could she be ignorant of the measures taken by the governor, measures which concerned her so directly?

But, if she was ignorant of it, she would come in an hour to the quay, and there some merciless agent would refuse her a passage! At any cost, he must see her beforehand, and enable her to avoid such a repulse.

But all his endeavors were in vain, and he at length almost despaired of finding her again. It was eleven o'clock, and Michael thought of presenting his podorojna at the office of the head of police. The proclamation evidently did not concern him, since the emergency had been foreseen for him, but he wished to make sure that nothing would hinder his departure from the town.

Michael then returned to the other side of the Volga, to the quarter in which was the office of the head of police. An immense crowd was collected there; for though all foreigners were ordered to quit the province, they had notwithstanding to go through certain forms before they could depart.

Without this precaution, some Russian more or less implicated in the Tartar movement would have been able, in a disguise, to pass the frontier--just those whom the order wished to prevent going. The strangers were sent away, but still had to gain permission to go.

Mountebanks, gypsies, Tsiganes, Zingaris, mingled with merchants from Persia, Turkey, India, Turkestan, China, filled the court and offices of the police station.

Everyone was in a hurry, for the means of transport would be much sought after among this crowd of banished people, and those who did not set about it soon ran a great risk of not being able to leave the town in the prescribed time, which would expose them to some brutal treatment from the governor's agents.

Owing to the strength of his elbows Michael was able to cross the court. But to get into the office and up to the clerk's little window was a much more difficult business. However, a word into an inspector's ear and a few judiciously given roubles were powerful enough to gain him a passage. The man, after taking him into the waiting-room, went to call an upper clerk. Michael Strogoff would not be long in making everything right with the police and being free in his movements.

Whilst waiting, he looked about him, and what did he see? There, fallen, rather than seated, on a bench, was a girl, prey to a silent despair,

although her face could scarcely be seen, the profile alone being visible against the wall. Michael Strogoff could not be mistaken. He instantly recognized the young Livonian.

Not knowing the governor's orders, she had come to the police office to get her pass signed. They had refused to sign it. No doubt she was authorized to go to Irkutsk, but the order was peremptory--it annulled all previous au-thorizations, and the routes to Siberia were closed to her. Michael, delighted at having found her again, approached the girl.

She looked up for a moment and her face brightened on recognizing her traveling companion. She instinctively rose and, like a drowning man who clutches at a spar, she was about to ask his help.

At that moment the agent touched Michael on the shoulder, "The head of police will see you," he said.

"Good," returned Michael. And without saying a word to her for whom he had been searching all day, without reassuring her by even a gesture, which might compromise either her or himself, he followed the man.

The young Livonian, seeing the only being to whom she could look for help disappear, fell back again on her bench.

Three minutes had not passed before Michael Strogoff reappeared, accompanied by the agent. In his hand he held his podorojna, which

threw open the roads to Siberia for him. He again approached the young Livonian, and holding out his hand: "Sister," said he.

She understood. She rose as if some sudden inspiration prevented her from hesitating a moment.

"Sister," repeated Michael Strogoff, "we are authorized to continue our journey to Irkutsk. Will you come with me?"

"I will follow you, brother," replied the girl, putting her hand into that of Michael Strogoff. And together they left the police station.

CHAPTER VII GOING DOWN THE VOLGA

A LITTLE before midday, the steamboat's bell drew to the wharf on the Volga an unusually large concourse of people, for not only were those about to embark who had intended to go, but the many who were compelled to go contrary to their wishes. The boilers of the Caucasus were under full pressure; a slight smoke issued from its funnel, whilst the end of the escape-pipe and the lids of the valves were crowned with white vapor. It is needless to say that the police kept a close watch over the departure of the Caucasus, and showed themselves pitiless to those travelers who did not satisfactorily answer their questions.

Numerous Cossacks came and went on the quay, ready to assist the agents, but they had not to interfere, as no one ventured to offer the slightest resistance to their orders. Exactly at the hour the last clang of the bell sounded, the powerful wheels of the steamboat began to beat the water, and the Caucasus passed rapidly between the two towns of which Nijni-Novgorod is composed.

Michael Strogoff and the young Livonian had taken a passage on board the Caucasus. Their embarkation was made without any difficulty. As is known, the podorojna, drawn up in the name of Nicholas Korpanoff, authorized this merchant to be accompanied on his journey to Siberia. They appeared, therefore, to be a brother and sister traveling under the protection of the imperial police. Both, seated together at the stern, gazed at the receding town, so disturbed by the governor's order.

Michael had as yet said nothing to the girl, he had not even questioned her. He waited until she should speak to him, when that was necessary. She had been anxious to leave that town, in which, but for the providential intervention of this unexpected protector, she would have remained imprisoned. She said nothing, but her looks spoke her thanks.

The Volga, the Rha of the ancients, the largest river in all Europe, is almost three thousand miles in length. Its waters, rather unwholesome in its upper part, are improved at Nijni-Novgorod by those of the Oka, a rapid affluent, issuing from the central provinces of Russia. The system of Russian canals and rivers has been justly compared to a gigantic tree whose branches spread over every part of the empire. The Volga forms the trunk of this tree, and it has for roots seventy mouths opening into the Caspian Sea. It is navigable as far as Rjef, a town in the government of Tver, that is, along the greater part of its course.

The steamboats plying between Perm and Nijni-Novgorod rapidly perform the two hundred and fifty miles which separate this town from the town of Kasan. It is true that these boats have only to descend the Volga, which adds nearly two miles of current per hour to their own speed; but on arriving at the confluence of the Kama, a little below Kasan, they are obliged to quit the Volga for the smaller river, up which they ascend to Perm. Powerful as were her machines, the Caucasus could not thus, after entering the Kama, make against the current more than ten miles an hour. Including an hour's stoppage at Kasan, the voyage from Nijni-Novgorod to Perm would take from between sixty to sixty-two hours.

The steamer was very well arranged, and the passengers, according to their condition or resources, occupied three distinct classes on board. Michael Strogoff had taken care to engage two first-class cabins, so that his young companion might retire into hers whenever she liked.

The Caucasus was loaded with passengers of every description. A number of Asiatic traders had thought it best to leave Nijni-Novgorod immediately. In that part of the steamer reserved for the first-class might be seen Armenians in long robes and a sort of miter on their heads; Jews, known by their conical caps; rich Chinese in their traditional costume, a very wide blue, violet, or black robe; Turks, wearing the national turban; Hindoos, with square caps, and a simple string for a girdle, some of whom, hold in their hands all the traffic of Central Asia; and, lastly, Tartars, wearing boots, ornamented with many-colored braid, and the breast a mass of embroidery. All these merchants had been obliged to pile up their numerous bales and chests in the hold and on the deck; and the transport of their baggage would cost them dear, for, according to the regulations, each person had only a right to twenty pounds' weight.

In the bows of the Caucasus were more numerous groups of passengers, not only foreigners, but also Russians, who were not forbidden by the order to go back to their towns in the province. There were mujiks with caps on their heads, and wearing checked shirts under their wide pelisses; peasants of the Volga, with blue trousers stuffed into their boots,

rose-colored cotton shirts, drawn in by a cord, felt caps; a few women, habited in flowery-patterned cotton dresses, gay-colored aprons, and bright handkerchiefs on their heads. These were principally third-class passengers, who were, happily, not troubled by the prospect of a long return voyage. The Caucasus passed numerous boats being towed up the stream, carrying all sorts of merchandise to Nijni-Novgorod. Then passed rafts of wood interminably long, and barges loaded to the gunwale, and nearly sinking under water. A bootless voyage they were making, since the fair had been abruptly broken up at its outset.

The waves caused by the steamer splashed on the banks, covered with flocks of wild duck, who flew away uttering deafening cries. A little farther, on the dry fields, bordered with willows, and aspens, were scattered a few cows, sheep, and herds of pigs. Fields, sown with thin buckwheat and rye, stretched away to a background of half-cultivated hills, offering no remarkable prospect. The pencil of an artist in quest of the picturesque would have found nothing to reproduce in this monotonous landscape.

The Caucasus had been steaming on for almost two hours, when the young Livonian, addressing herself to Michael, said, "Are you going to Irkutsk, brother?"

"Yes, sister," answered the young man. "We are going the same way. Consequently, where I go, you shall go."

"To-morrow, brother, you shall know why I left the shores of the Baltic to go beyond the Ural Mountains."

"I ask you nothing, sister."

"You shall know all," replied the girl, with a faint smile. "A sister should hide nothing from her brother. But I cannot to-day. Fatigue and sorrow have broken me."

"Will you go and rest in your cabin?" asked Michael Strogoff.

"Yes--yes; and to-morrow--"

"Come then--"

He hesitated to finish his sentence, as if he had wished to end it by the name of his companion, of which he was still ignorant.

"Nadia," said she, holding out her hand.

"Come, Nadia," answered Michael, "and make what use you like of your brother Nicholas Korpanoff." And he led the girl to the cabin engaged for her off the saloon.

Michael Strogoff returned on deck, and eager for any news which might bear on his journey, he mingled in the groups of passengers, though

without taking any part in the conversation. Should he by any chance be questioned, and obliged to reply, he would announce himself as the merchant Nicholas Korpanoff, going back to the frontier, for he did not wish it to be suspected that a special permission authorized him to travel to Siberia.

The foreigners in the steamer could evidently speak of nothing but the occurrences of the day, of the order and its consequences. These poor people, scarcely recovered from the fatigue of a journey across Central Asia, found themselves obliged to return, and if they did not give loud vent to their anger and despair, it was because they dared not. Fear, mingled with respect, restrained them. It was possible that inspectors of police, charged with watching the passengers, had secretly embarked on board the Caucasus, and it was just as well to keep silence; expulsion, after all, was a good deal preferable to imprisonment in a fortress. Therefore the men were either silent, or spoke with so much caution that it was scarcely possible to get any useful information.

Michael Strogoff thus could learn nothing here; but if mouths were often shut at his approach--for they did not know him--his ears were soon struck by the sound of one voice, which cared little whether it was heard or not.

The man with the hearty voice spoke Russian, but with a French accent; and another speaker answered him more reservedly. "What," said the first, "are you on board this boat, too, my dear fellow; you whom I

met at the imperial fete in Moscow, and just caught a glimpse of at Nijni-Novgorod?"

"Yes, it's I," answered the second drily.

"Really, I didn't expect to be so closely followed."

"I am not following you sir; I am preceding you."

"Precede! precede! Let us march abreast, keeping step, like two soldiers on parade, and for the time, at least, let us agree, if you will, that one shall not pass the other."

"On the contrary, I shall pass you."

"We shall see that, when we are at the seat of war; but till then, why, let us be traveling companions. Later, we shall have both time and occasion to be rivals."

"Enemies."

"Enemies, if you like. There is a precision in your words, my dear fellow, particularly agreeable to me. One may always know what one has to look for, with you."

"What is the harm?"

"No harm at all. So, in my turn, I will ask your permission to state our respective situations."

"State away."

"You are going to Perm--like me?"

"Like you."

"And probably you will go from Perm to Ekaterenburg, since that is the best and safest route by which to cross the Ural Mountains?"

"Probably."

"Once past the frontier, we shall be in Siberia, that is to say in the midst of the invasion."

"We shall be there."

"Well! then, and only then, will be the time to say, Each for himself, and God for--"

"For me."

"For you, all by yourself! Very well! But since we have a week of

neutral days before us, and since it is very certain that news will not shower down upon us on the way, let us be friends until we become rivals again."

"Enemies."

"Yes; that's right, enemies. But till then, let us act together, and not try and ruin each other. All the same, I promise you to keep to myself all that I can see--"

"And I, all that I can hear."

"Is that agreed?"

"It is agreed."

"Your hand?"

"Here it is." And the hand of the first speaker, that is to say, five wide-open fingers, vigorously shook the two fingers coolly extended by the other.

"By the bye," said the first, "I was able this morning to telegraph the very words of the order to my cousin at seventeen minutes past ten."

"And I sent it to the Daily Telegraph at thirteen minutes past ten."

"Bravo, Mr. Blount!"

"Very good, M. Jolivet."

"I will try and match that!"

"It will be difficult."

"I can try, however."

So saying, the French correspondent familiarly saluted the Englishman, who bowed stiffly. The governor's proclamation did not concern these two news-hunters, as they were neither Russians nor foreigners of Asiatic origin. However, being urged by the same instinct, they had left Nijni-Novgorod together. It was natural that they should take the same means of transport, and that they should follow the same route to the Siberian steppes. Traveling companions, whether enemies or friends, they had a week to pass together before "the hunt would be open." And then success to the most expert! Alcide Jolivet had made the first advances, and Harry Blount had accepted them though he had done so coldly.

That very day at dinner the Frenchman open as ever and even too loquacious, the Englishman still silent and grave, were seen hobnobbing at the same table, drinking genuine Cliquot, at six roubles the bottle, made from the fresh sap of the birch-trees of the country. On hearing

them chatting away together, Michael Strogoff said to himself: "Those are inquisitive and indiscreet fellows whom I shall probably meet again on the way. It will be prudent for me to keep them at a distance."

The young Livonian did not come to dinner. She was asleep in her cabin, and Michael did not like to awaken her. It was evening before she reappeared on the deck of the Caucasus. The long twilight imparted a coolness to the atmosphere eagerly enjoyed by the passengers after the stifling heat of the day. As the evening advanced, the greater number never even thought of going into the saloon. Stretched on the benches, they inhaled with delight the slight breeze caused by the speed of the steamer. At this time of year, and under this latitude, the sky scarcely darkened between sunset and dawn, and left the steersman light enough to guide his steamer among the numerous vessels going up or down the Volga.

Between eleven and two, however, the moon being new, it was almost dark. Nearly all the passengers were then asleep on the deck, and the silence was disturbed only by the noise of the paddles striking the water at regular intervals. Anxiety kept Michael Strogoff awake. He walked up and down, but always in the stern of the steamer. Once, however, he happened to pass the engine-room. He then found himself in the part reserved for second and third-class passengers.

There, everyone was lying asleep, not only on the benches, but also on the bales, packages, and even the deck itself. Some care was necessary not to tread on the sleepers, who were lying about everywhere. They were

chiefly mujiks, accustomed to hard couches, and quite satisfied with the planks of the deck. But no doubt they would, all the same, have soundly abused the clumsy fellow who roused them with an accidental kick.

Michael Strogoff took care, therefore, not to disturb anyone. By going thus to the end of the boat, he had no other idea but that of striving against sleep by a rather longer walk. He reached the forward deck, and was already climbing the forecastle ladder, when he heard someone speaking near him. He stopped. The voices appeared to come from a group of passengers enveloped in cloaks and wraps. It was impossible to recognize them in the dark, though it sometimes happened that, when the steamer's chimney sent forth a plume of ruddy flames, the sparks seemed to fall amongst the group as though thousands of spangles had been suddenly illuminated.

Michael was about to step up the ladder, when a few words reached his ear, uttered in that strange tongue which he had heard during the night at the fair. Instinctively he stopped to listen. Protected by the shadow of the forecastle, he could not be perceived himself. As to seeing the passengers who were talking, that was impossible. He must confine himself to listening.

The first words exchanged were of no importance--to him at least--but they allowed him to recognize the voices of the man and woman whom he had heard at Nijni-Novgorod. This, of course, made him redouble his attention. It was, indeed, not at all impossible that these same

Tsiganes, now banished, should be on board the Caucasus.

And it was well for him that he listened, for he distinctly heard this question and answer made in the Tartar idiom: "It is said that a courier has set out from Moscow for Irkutsk."

"It is so said, Sangarre; but either this courier will arrive too late, or he will not arrive at all."

Michael Strogoff started involuntarily at this reply, which concerned him so directly. He tried to see if the man and woman who had just spoken were really those whom he suspected, but he could not succeed.

In a few moments Michael Strogoff had regained the stern of the vessel without having been perceived, and, taking a seat by himself, he buried his face in his hands. It might have been supposed that he was asleep.

He was not asleep, however, and did not even think of sleeping. He was reflecting, not without a lively apprehension: "Who is it knows of my departure, and who can have any interest in knowing it?"

CHAPTER VIII GOING UP THE KAMA

THE next day, the 18th of July, at twenty minutes to seven in the morning, the Caucasus reached the Kasan quay, seven versts from the town.

Kasan is situated at the confluence of the Volga and Kasanka. It is an important chief town of the government, and a Greek archbishopric, as well as the seat of a university. The varied population preserves an Asiatic character. Although the town was so far from the landing-place, a large crowd was collected on the quay. They had come for news. The governor of the province had published an order identical with that of Nijni-Novgorod. Police officers and a few Cossacks kept order among the crowd, and cleared the way both for the passengers who were disembarking and also for those who were embarking on board the Caucasus, minutely examining both classes of travelers. The one were the Asiatics who were being expelled; the other, mujiks stopping at Kasan.

Michael Strogoff unconcernedly watched the bustle which occurs at all quays on the arrival of a steam vessel. The Caucasus would stay for an hour to renew her fuel. Michael did not even think of landing. He was unwilling to leave the young Livonian girl alone on board, as she had not yet reappeared on deck.

The two journalists had risen at dawn, as all good huntsmen should do. They went on shore and mingled with the crowd, each keeping to his own

peculiar mode of proceeding; Harry Blount, sketching different types, or noting some observation; Alcide Jolivet contenting himself with asking questions, confiding in his memory, which never failed him.

There was a report along all the frontier that the insurrection and invasion had reached considerable proportions. Communication between Siberia and the empire was already extremely difficult. All this Michael Strogoff heard from the new arrivals. This information could not but cause him great uneasiness, and increase his wish of being beyond the Ural Mountains, so as to judge for himself of the truth of these rumors, and enable him to guard against any possible contingency. He was thinking of seeking more direct intelligence from some native of Kasan, when his attention was suddenly diverted.

Among the passengers who were leaving the Caucasus, Michael recognized the troop of Tsiganes who, the day before, had appeared in the Nijni-Novgorod fair. There, on the deck of the steamboat were the old Bohemian and the woman. With them, and no doubt under their direction, landed about twenty dancers and singers, from fifteen to twenty years of age, wrapped in old cloaks, which covered their spangled dresses. These dresses, just then glancing in the first rays of the sun, reminded Michael of the curious appearance which he had observed during the night. It must have been the glitter of those spangles in the bright flames issuing from the steamboat's funnel which had attracted his attention.

"Evidently," said Michael to himself, "this troop of Tsiganes, after remaining below all day, crouched under the forecastle during the night. Were these gipsies trying to show themselves as little as possible? Such is not according to the usual custom of their race."

Michael Strogoff no longer doubted that the expressions he had heard, had proceeded from this tawny group, and had been exchanged between the old gypsy and the woman to whom he gave the Mongolian name of Sangarre. Michael involuntarily moved towards the gangway, as the Bohemian troop was leaving the steamboat.

The old Bohemian was there, in a humble attitude, little conformable with the effrontery natural to his race. One would have said that he was endeavoring rather to avoid attention than to attract it. His battered hat, browned by the suns of every clime, was pulled forward over his wrinkled face. His arched back was bent under an old cloak, wrapped closely round him, notwithstanding the heat. It would have been difficult, in this miserable dress, to judge of either his size or face.
Near him was the Tsigane, Sangarre, a woman about thirty years old. She was tall and well made, with olive complexion, magnificent eyes, and golden hair.

Many of the young dancers were remarkably pretty, all possessing the clear-cut features of their race. These Tsiganes are generally very attractive, and more than one of the great Russian nobles, who try to vie with the English in eccentricity, has not hesitated to choose his

wife from among these gypsy girls. One of them was humming a song of strange rhythm, which might be thus rendered:

"Glitters brightly the gold
In my raven locks streaming
Rich coral around
My graceful neck gleaming;
Like a bird of the air,
Through the wide world I roam."

The laughing girl continued her song, but Michael Strogoff ceased to listen. It struck him just then that the Tsigane, Sangarre, was regarding him with a peculiar gaze, as if to fix his features indelibly in her memory.

It was but for a few moments, when Sangarre herself followed the old man and his troop, who had already left the vessel. "That's a bold gypsy," said Michael to himself. "Could she have recognized me as the man whom she saw at Nijni-Novgorod? These confounded Tsiganes have the eyes of a cat! They can see in the dark; and that woman there might well know--"

Michael Strogoff was on the point of following Sangarre and the gypsy band, but he stopped. "No," thought he, "no unguarded proceedings. If I were to stop that old fortune teller and his companions my incognito would run a risk of being discovered. Besides, now they have landed, before they can pass the frontier I shall be far beyond it. They may

take the route from Kasan to Ishim, but that affords no resources to travelers. Besides a tarantass, drawn by good Siberian horses, will always go faster than a gypsy cart! Come, friend Korpanoff, be easy."

By this time the man and Sangarre had disappeared.

Kasan is justly called the "Gate of Asia" and considered as the center of Siberian and Bokharian commerce; for two roads begin here and lead across the Ural Mountains. Michael Strogoff had very judiciously chosen the one by Perm and Ekaterenburg. It is the great stage road, well supplied with relays kept at the expense of the government, and is prolonged from Ishim to Irkutsk.

It is true that a second route--the one of which Michael had just spoken--avoiding the slight detour by Perm, also connects Kasan with Ishim. It is perhaps shorter than the other, but this advantage is much diminished by the absence of post-houses, the bad roads, and lack of villages. Michael Strogoff was right in the choice he had made, and if, as appeared probable, the gipsies should follow the second route from Kasan to Ishim, he had every chance of arriving before them.

An hour afterwards the bell rang on board the Caucasus, calling the new passengers, and recalling the former ones. It was now seven o'clock in the morning. The requisite fuel had been received on board. The whole vessel began to vibrate from the effects of the steam. She was ready to start. Passengers going from Kasan to Perm were crowding on the deck.

Michael noticed that of the two reporters Blount alone had rejoined the steamer. Was Alcide Jolivet about to miss his passage?

But just as the ropes were being cast off, Jolivet appeared, tearing along. The steamer was already sheering off, the gangway had been drawn onto the quay, but Alcide Jolivet would not stick at such a little thing as that, so, with a bound like a harlequin, he alighted on the deck of the Caucasus almost in his rival's arms.

"I thought the Caucasus was going without you," said the latter.

"Bah!" answered Jolivet, "I should soon have caught you up again, by chartering a boat at my cousin's expense, or by traveling post at twenty copecks a verst, and on horseback. What could I do? It was so long a way from the quay to the telegraph office."

"Have you been to the telegraph office?" asked Harry Blount, biting his lips.

"That's exactly where I have been!" answered Jolivet, with his most amiable smile.

"And is it still working to Kolyvan?"

"That I don't know, but I can assure you, for instance, that it is

working from Kasan to Paris."

"You sent a dispatch to your cousin?"

"With enthusiasm."

"You had learnt then--?"

"Look here, little father, as the Russians say," replied Alcide Jolivet, "I'm a good fellow, and I don't wish to keep anything from you. The Tartars, and Feofar-Khan at their head, have passed Semipolatinsk, and are descending the Irtish. Do what you like with that!"

What! such important news, and Harry Blount had not known it; and his rival, who had probably learned it from some inhabitant of Kasan, had already transmitted it to Paris. The English paper was distanced! Harry Blount, crossing his hands behind him, walked off and seated himself in the stern without uttering a word.

About ten o'clock in the morning, the young Livonian, leaving her cabin, appeared on deck. Michael Strogoff went forward and took her hand. "Look, sister!" said he, leading her to the bows of the Caucasus.

The view was indeed well worth seeing. The Caucasus had reached the confluence of the Volga and the Kama. There she would leave the former river, after having descended it for nearly three hundred miles, to

ascend the latter for a full three hundred.

The Kama was here very wide, and its wooded banks lovely. A few white sails enlivened the sparkling water. The horizon was closed by a line of hills covered with aspens, alders, and sometimes large oaks.

But these beauties of nature could not distract the thoughts of the young Livonian even for an instant. She had left her hand in that of her companion, and turning to him, "At what distance are we from Moscow?" she asked.

"Nine hundred versts," answered Michael.

"Nine hundred, out of seven thousand!" murmured the girl.

The bell now announced the breakfast hour. Nadia followed Michael Strogoff to the restaurant. She ate little, and as a poor girl whose means are small would do. Michael thought it best to content himself with the fare which satisfied his companion; and in less than twenty minutes he and Nadia returned on deck. There they seated themselves in the stern, and without preamble, Nadia, lowering her voice to be heard by him alone, began:

"Brother, I am the daughter of an exile. My name is Nadia Fedor. My mother died at Riga scarcely a month ago, and I am going to Irkutsk to rejoin my father and share his exile."

"I, too, am going to Irkutsk," answered Michael, "and I shall thank Heaven if it enables me to give Nadia Fedor safe and sound into her father's hands."

"Thank you, brother," replied Nadia.

Michael Strogoff then added that he had obtained a special podorojna for Siberia, and that the Russian authorities could in no way hinder his progress.

Nadia asked nothing more. She saw in this fortunate meeting with Michael a means only of accelerating her journey to her father.

"I had," said she, "a permit which authorized me to go to Irkutsk, but the new order annulled that; and but for you, brother, I should have been unable to leave the town, in which, without doubt, I should have perished."

"And dared you, alone, Nadia," said Michael, "attempt to cross the steppes of Siberia?"

"The Tartar invasion was not known when I left Riga. It was only at Moscow that I learnt the news."

"And despite it, you continued your journey?"

"It was my duty."

The words showed the character of the brave girl.

She then spoke of her father, Wassili Fedor. He was a much-esteemed physician at Riga. But his connection with some secret society having been asserted, he received orders to start for Irkutsk. The police who brought the order conducted him without delay beyond the frontier.

Wassili Fedor had but time to embrace his sick wife and his daughter, so soon to be left alone, when, shedding bitter tears, he was led away. A year and a half after her husband's departure, Madame Fedor died in the arms of her daughter, who was thus left alone and almost penniless. Nadia Fedor then asked, and easily obtained from the Russian government, an authorization to join her father at Irkutsk. She wrote and told him she was starting. She had barely enough money for this long journey, and yet she did not hesitate to undertake it. She would do what she could. God would do the rest.

CHAPTER IX DAY AND NIGHT IN A TARANTASS

THE next day, the 19th of July, the Caucasus reached Perm, the last place at which she touched on the Kama.

The government of which Perm is the capital is one of the largest in the Russian Empire, and, extending over the Ural Mountains, encroaches on Siberian territory. Marble quarries, mines of salt, platina, gold, and coal are worked here on a large scale. Although Perm, by its situation, has become an important town, it is by no means attractive, being extremely dirty, and without resources. This want of comfort is of no consequence to those going to Siberia, for they come from the more civilized districts, and are supplied with all necessaries.

At Perm travelers from Siberia resell their vehicles, more or less damaged by the long journey across the plains. There, too, those passing from Europe to Asia purchase carriages, or sleighs in the winter season.

Michael Strogoff had already sketched out his programme. A vehicle carrying the mail usually runs across the Ural Mountains, but this, of course, was discontinued. Even if it had not been so, he would not have taken it, as he wished to travel as fast as possible, without depending on anyone. He wisely preferred to buy a carriage, and journey by stages, stimulating the zeal of the postillions by well-applied "na vodkou," or tips.

Unfortunately, in consequence of the measures taken against foreigners of Asiatic origin, a large number of travelers had already left Perm, and therefore conveyances were extremely rare. Michael was obliged to content himself with what had been rejected by others. As to horses, as long as the Czar's courier was not in Siberia, he could exhibit his podorojna, and the postmasters would give him the preference. But, once out of Europe, he had to depend alone on the power of his roubles.

But to what sort of a vehicle should he harness his horses? To a telga or to a tarantass? The telga is nothing but an open four-wheeled cart, made entirely of wood, the pieces fastened together by means of strong rope. Nothing could be more primitive, nothing could be less comfortable; but, on the other hand, should any accident happen on the way, nothing could be more easily repaired. There is no want of firs on the Russian frontier, and axle-trees grow naturally in forests. The post extraordinary, known by the name of "perck-ladnoi," is carried by the telga, as any road is good enough for it. It must be confessed that sometimes the ropes which fasten the concern together break, and whilst the hinder part remains stuck in some bog, the fore-part arrives at the post-house on two wheels; but this result is considered quite satisfactory.

Michael Strogoff would have been obliged to employ a telga, if he had not been lucky enough to discover a tarantass. It is to be hoped that the invention of Russian coach-builders will devise some improvement in this last-named vehicle. Springs are wanting in it as well as in the

telga; in the absence of iron, wood is not spared; but its four wheels, with eight or nine feet between them, assure a certain equilibrium over the jolting rough roads. A splash-board protects the travelers from the mud, and a strong leathern hood, which may be pulled quite over the occupiers, shelters them from the great heat and violent storms of the summer. The tarantass is as solid and as easy to repair as the telga, and is, moreover, less addicted to leaving its hinder part in the middle of the road.

It was not without careful search that Michael managed to discover this tarantass, and there was probably not a second to be found in all Perm. He haggled long about the price, for form's sake, to act up to his part as Nicholas Korpanoff, a plain merchant of Irkutsk.

Nadia had followed her companion in his search after a suitable vehicle. Although the object of each was different, both were equally anxious to arrive at their goal. One would have said the same will animated them both.

"Sister," said Michael, "I wish I could have found a more comfortable conveyance for you."

"Do you say that to me, brother, when I would have gone on foot, if need were, to rejoin my father?"

"I do not doubt your courage, Nadia, but there are physical fatigues a

woman may be unable to endure."

"I shall endure them, whatever they be," replied the girl. "If you ever hear a complaint from me you may leave me in the road, and continue your journey alone."

Half an hour later, the podorojna being presented by Michael, three post-horses were harnessed to the tarantass. These animals, covered with long hair, were very like long-legged bears. They were small but spirited, being of Siberian breed. The way in which the iemschik harnessed them was thus: one, the largest, was secured between two long shafts, on whose farther end was a hoop carrying tassels and bells; the two others were simply fastened by ropes to the steps of the tarantass. This was the complete harness, with mere strings for reins.

Neither Michael Strogoff nor the young Livonian girl had any baggage. The rapidity with which one wished to make the journey, and the more than modest resources of the other, prevented them from embarrassing themselves with packages. It was a fortunate thing, under the circumstances, for the tarantass could not have carried both baggage and travelers. It was only made for two persons, without counting the iemschik, who kept his equilibrium on his narrow seat in a marvelous manner.

The iemschik is changed at every relay. The man who drove the tarantass during the first stage was, like his horses, a Siberian, and no less

shaggy than they; long hair, cut square on the forehead, hat with a turned-up brim, red belt, coat with crossed facings and buttons stamped with the imperial cipher. The iemschik, on coming up with his team, threw an inquisitive glance at the passengers of the tarantass. No luggage!--and had there been, where in the world could he have stowed it? Rather shabby in appearance too. He looked contemptuous.

"Crows," said he, without caring whether he was overheard or not; "crows, at six copecks a verst!"

"No, eagles!" said Michael, who understood the iemschik's slang perfectly; "eagles, do you hear, at nine copecks a verst, and a tip besides."

He was answered by a merry crack of the whip.

In the language of the Russian postillions the "crow" is the stingy or poor traveler, who at the post-houses only pays two or three copecks a verst for the horses. The "eagle" is the traveler who does not mind expense, to say nothing of liberal tips. Therefore the crow could not claim to fly as rapidly as the imperial bird.

Nadia and Michael immediately took their places in the tarantass. A small store of provisions was put in the box, in case at any time they were delayed in reaching the post-houses, which are very comfortably provided under direction of the State. The hood was pulled up, as it was

insupport-ably hot, and at twelve o'clock the tarantass left Perm in a cloud of dust.

The way in which the iemschik kept up the pace of his team would have certainly astonished travelers who, being neither Russians nor Siberians, were not accustomed to this sort of thing. The leader, rather larger than the others, kept to a steady long trot, perfectly regular, whether up or down hill. The two other horses seemed to know no other pace than the gallop, though they performed many an eccentric curvette as they went along. The iemschik, however, never touched them, only urging them on by startling cracks of his whip. But what epithets he lavished on them, including the names of all the saints in the calendar, when they behaved like docile and conscientious animals! The string which served as reins would have had no influence on the spirited beasts, but the words "na pravo," to the right, "na levo," to the left, pronounced in a guttural tone, were more effectual than either bridle or snaffle.

And what amiable expressions! "Go on, my doves!" the iemschik would say. "Go on, pretty swallows! Fly, my little pigeons! Hold up, my cousin on the left! Gee up, my little father on the right!"

But when the pace slackened, what insulting expressions, instantly understood by the sensitive animals! "Go on, you wretched snail! Confound you, you slug! I'll roast you alive, you tortoise, you!"

Whether or not it was from this way of driving, which requires the iemschiks to possess strong throats more than muscular arms, the tarantass flew along at a rate of from twelve to fourteen miles an hour. Michael Strogoff was accustomed both to the sort of vehicle and the mode of traveling. Neither jerks nor jolts incommoded him. He knew that a Russian driver never even tries to avoid either stones, ruts, bogs, fallen trees, or trenches, which may happen to be in the road. He was used to all that. His companion ran a risk of being hurt by the violent jolts of the tarantass, but she would not complain.

For a little while Nadia did not speak. Then possessed with the one thought, that of reaching her journey's end, "I have calculated that there are three hundred versts between Perm and Ekaterenburg, brother," said she. "Am I right?"

"You are quite right, Nadia," answered Michael; "and when we have reached Ekaterenburg, we shall be at the foot of the Ural Mountains on the opposite side."

"How long will it take to get across the mountains?"

"Forty-eight hours, for we shall travel day and night. I say day and night, Nadia," added he, "for I cannot stop even for a moment; I go on without rest to Irkutsk."

"I shall not delay you, brother; no, not even for an hour, and we will

travel day and night."

"Well then, Nadia, if the Tartar invasion has only left the road open, we shall arrive in twenty days."

"You have made this journey before?" asked Nadia.

"Many times."

"During winter we should have gone more rapidly and surely, should we not?"

"Yes, especially with more rapidity, but you would have suffered much from the frost and snow."

"What matter! Winter is the friend of Russia."

"Yes, Nadia, but what a constitution anyone must have to endure such friendship! I have often seen the temperature in the Siberian steppes fall to more than forty degrees below freezing point! I have felt, notwithstanding my reindeer coat, my heart growing chill, my limbs stiffening, my feet freezing in triple woolen socks; I have seen my sleigh horses covered with a coating of ice, their breath congealed at their nostrils. I have seen the brandy in my flask change into hard stone, on which not even my knife could make an impression. But my sleigh flew like the wind. Not an obstacle on the plain, white and

level farther than the eye could reach! No rivers to stop one! Hard ice everywhere, the route open, the road sure! But at the price of what suffering, Nadia, those alone could say, who have never returned, but whose bodies have been covered up by the snow storm."

"However, you have returned, brother," said Nadia.

"Yes, but I am a Siberian, and, when quite a child, I used to follow my father to the chase, and so became inured to these hardships. But when you said to me, Nadia, that winter would not have stopped you, that you would have gone alone, ready to struggle against the frightful Siberian climate, I seemed to see you lost in the snow and falling, never to rise again."

"How many times have you crossed the steppe in winter?" asked the young Livonian.

"Three times, Nadia, when I was going to Omsk."

"And what were you going to do at Omsk?"

"See my mother, who was expecting me."

"And I am going to Irkutsk, where my father expects me. I am taking him my mother's last words. That is as much as to tell you, brother, that nothing would have prevented me from setting out."

"You are a brave girl, Nadia," replied Michael. "God Himself would have led you."

All day the tarantass was driven rapidly by the iemschiks, who succeeded each other at every stage. The eagles of the mountain would not have found their name dishonored by these "eagles" of the highway. The high price paid for each horse, and the tips dealt out so freely, recommended the travelers in a special way. Perhaps the postmasters thought it singular that, after the publication of the order, a young man and his sister, evidently both Russians, could travel freely across Siberia, which was closed to everyone else, but their papers were all en regle and they had the right to pass.

However, Michael Strogoff and Nadia were not the only travelers on their way from Perm to Ekaterenburg. At the first stages, the courier of the Czar had learnt that a carriage preceded them, but, as there was no want of horses, he did not trouble himself about that.

During the day, halts were made for food alone. At the post-houses could be found lodging and provision. Besides, if there was not an inn, the house of the Russian peasant would have been no less hospitable. In the villages, which are almost all alike, with their white-walled, green-roofed chapels, the traveler might knock at any door, and it would be opened to him. The moujik would come out, smiling and extending his hand to his guest. He would offer him bread and salt, the burning

charcoal would be put into the "samovar," and he would be made quite at home. The family would turn out themselves rather than that he should not have room. The stranger is the relation of all. He is "one sent by God."

On arriving that evening Michael instinctively asked the postmaster how many hours ago the carriage which preceded them had passed that stage.

"Two hours ago, little father," replied the postmaster.

"Is it a berlin?"

"No, a telga."

"How many travelers?"

"Two."

"And they are going fast?"

"Eagles!"

"Let them put the horses to as soon as possible."

Michael and Nadia, resolved not to stop even for an hour, traveled all night. The weather continued fine, though the atmosphere was heavy and

becoming charged with electricity. It was to be hoped that a storm would not burst whilst they were among the mountains, for there it would be terrible. Being accustomed to read atmospheric signs, Michael Strogoff knew that a struggle of the elements was approaching.

The night passed without incident. Notwithstanding the jolting of the tarantass, Nadia was able to sleep for some hours. The hood was partly raised so as to give as much air as there was in the stifling atmosphere.

Michael kept awake all night, mistrusting the iemschiks, who are apt to sleep at their posts. Not an hour was lost at the relays, not an hour on the road.

The next day, the 20th of July, at about eight o'clock in the morning, they caught the first glimpse of the Ural Mountains in the east. This important chain which separates Russia from Siberia was still at a great distance, and they could not hope to reach it until the end of the day. The passage of the mountains must necessarily be performed during the next night. The sky was cloudy all day, and the temperature was therefore more bearable, but the weather was very threatening.

It would perhaps have been more prudent not to have ascended the mountains during the night, and Michael would not have done so, had he been permitted to wait; but when, at the last stage, the iemschik drew his attention to a peal of thunder reverberating among the rocks, he

merely said:

"Is a telga still before us?"

"Yes."

"How long is it in advance?"

"Nearly an hour."

"Forward, and a triple tip if we are at Ekaterenburg to-morrow morning."

CHAPTER X A STORM IN THE URAL MOUNTAINS

THE Ural Mountains extend in a length of over two thousand miles between Europe and Asia. Whether they are called the Urals, which is the Tartar, or the Poyas, which is the Russian name, they are correctly so termed; for these names signify "belt" in both languages. Rising on the shores of the Arctic Sea, they reach the borders of the Caspian. This was the barrier to be crossed by Michael Strogoff before he could enter Siberian Russia. The mountains could be crossed in one night, if no accident happened. Unfortunately, thunder muttering in the distance announced that a storm was at hand. The electric tension was such that it could not be dispersed without a tremendous explosion, which in the peculiar state of the atmosphere would be very terrible.

Michael took care that his young companion should be as well protected as possible. The hood, which might have been easily blown away, was fastened more securely with ropes, crossed above and at the back. The traces were doubled, and, as an additional precaution, the nave-boxes were stuffed with straw, as much to increase the strength of the wheels as to lessen the jolting, unavoidable on a dark night. Lastly, the fore and hinder parts, connected simply by the axles to the body of the tarantass, were joined one to the other by a crossbar, fixed by means of pins and screws.

Nadia resumed her place in the cart, and Michael took his seat beside her. Before the lowered hood hung two leathern curtains, which would in

some degree protect the travelers against the wind and rain. Two great lanterns, suspended from the iemschik's seat, threw a pale glimmer scarcely sufficient to light the way, but serving as warning lights to prevent any other carriage from running into them.

It was well that all these precautions were taken, in expectation of a rough night. The road led them up towards dense masses of clouds, and should the clouds not soon resolve into rain, the fog would be such that the tarantass would be unable to advance without danger of falling over some precipice.

The Ural chain does not attain any very great height, the highest summit not being more than five thousand feet. Eternal snow is there unknown, and what is piled up by the Siberian winter is soon melted by the summer sun. Shrubs and trees grow to a considerable height. The iron and copper mines, as well as those of precious stones, draw a considerable number of workmen to that region. Also, those villages termed "gavody" are there met with pretty frequently, and the road through the great passes is easily practicable for post-carriages.

But what is easy enough in fine weather and broad daylight, offers difficulties and perils when the elements are engaged in fierce warfare, and the traveler is in the midst of it. Michael Strogoff knew from former experience what a storm in the mountains was, and perhaps this would be as terrible as the snowstorms which burst forth with such vehemence in the winter.

Rain was not yet falling, so Michael raised the leathern curtains which protected the interior of the tarantass and looked out, watching the sides of the road, peopled with fantastic shadows, caused by the wavering light of the lanterns. Nadia, motionless, her arms folded, gazed forth also, though without leaning forward, whilst her companion, his body half out of the carriage, examined both sky and earth.

The calmness of the atmosphere was very threatening, the air being perfectly still. It was just as if Nature were half stifled, and could no longer breathe; her lungs, that is to say those gloomy, dense clouds, not being able to perform their functions. The silence would have been complete but for the grindings of the wheels of the tarantass over the road, the creaking of the axles, the snorting of the horses, and the clattering of their iron hoofs among the pebbles, sparks flying out on every side.

The road was perfectly deserted. The tarantass encountered neither pedestrians nor horsemen, nor a vehicle of any description, in the narrow defiles of the Ural, on this threatening night. Not even the fire of a charcoal-burner was visible in the woods, not an encampment of miners near the mines, not a hut among the brushwood.

Under these peculiar circumstances it might have been allowable to postpone the journey till the morning. Michael Strogoff, however, had not hesitated, he had no right to stop, but then--and it began to cause

him some anxiety--what possible reason could those travelers in the telga ahead have for being so imprudent?

Michael remained thus on the look-out for some time. About eleven o'clock lightning began to blaze continuously in the sky. The shadows of huge pines appeared and disappeared in the rapid light. Sometimes when the tarantass neared the side of the road, deep gulfs, lit up by the flashes, could be seen yawning beneath them. From time to time, on their vehicle giving a worse lurch than usual, they knew that they were crossing a bridge of roughly-hewn planks thrown over some chasm, thunder appearing actually to be rumbling below them. Besides this, a booming sound filled the air, which increased as they mounted higher. With these different noises rose the shouts of the iemschik, sometimes scolding, sometimes coaxing his poor beasts, who were suffering more from the oppression of the air than the roughness of the roads. Even the bells on the shafts could no longer rouse them, and they stumbled every instant.

"At what time shall we reach the top of the ridge?" asked Michael of the iemschik.

"At one o'clock in the morning if we ever get there at all," replied he, with a shake of his head.

"Why, my friend, this will not be your first storm in the mountains, will it?"

"No, and pray God it may not be my last!"

"Are you afraid?"

"No, I'm not afraid, but I repeat that I think you were wrong in starting."

"I should have been still more wrong had I stayed."

"Hold up, my pigeons!" cried the iemschik; it was his business to obey, not to question.

Just then a distant noise was heard, shrill whistling through the atmosphere, so calm a minute before. By the light of a dazzling flash, almost immediately followed by a tremendous clap of thunder, Michael could see huge pines on a high peak, bending before the blast. The wind was unchained, but as yet it was the upper air alone which was disturbed. Successive crashes showed that many of the trees had been unable to resist the burst of the hurricane. An avalanche of shattered trunks swept across the road and dashed over the precipice on the left, two hundred feet in front of the tarantass.

The horses stopped short.

"Get up, my pretty doves!" cried the iemschik, adding the cracking of his whip to the rumbling of the thunder.

Michael took Nadia's hand. "Are you asleep, sister?"

"No, brother."

"Be ready for anything; here comes the storm!"

"I am ready."

Michael Strogoff had only just time to draw the leathern curtains, when the storm was upon them.

The iemschik leapt from his seat and seized the horses' heads, for terrible danger threatened the whole party.

The tarantass was at a standstill at a turning of the road, down which swept the hurricane; it was absolutely necessary to hold the animals' heads to the wind, for if the carriage was taken broadside it must infallibly capsize and be dashed over the precipice. The frightened horses reared, and their driver could not manage to quiet them. His friendly expressions had been succeeded by the most insulting epithets. Nothing was of any use. The unfortunate animals, blinded by the lightning, terrified by the incessant peals of thunder, threatened every instant to break their traces and flee. The iemschik had no longer any control over his team.

At that moment Michael Strogoff threw himself from the tarantass and rushed to his assistance. Endowed with more than common strength, he managed, though not without difficulty, to master the horses.

The storm now raged with redoubled fury. A perfect avalanche of stones and trunks of trees began to roll down the slope above them.

"We cannot stop here," said Michael.

"We cannot stop anywhere," returned the iemschik, all his energies apparently overcome by terror. "The storm will soon send us to the bottom of the mountain, and that by the shortest way."

"Take you that horse, coward," returned Michael, "I'll look after this one."

A fresh burst of the storm interrupted him. The driver and he were obliged to crouch upon the ground to avoid being blown down. The carriage, notwithstanding their efforts and those of the horses, was gradually blown back, and had it not been stopped by the trunk of a tree, it would have gone over the edge of the precipice.

"Do not be afraid, Nadia!" cried Michael Strogoff.

"I'm not afraid," replied the young Livonian, her voice not betraying the slightest emotion.

The rumbling of the thunder ceased for an instant, the terrible blast had swept past into the gorge below.

"Will you go back?" said the iemschik.

"No, we must go on! Once past this turning, we shall have the shelter of the slope."

"But the horses won't move!"

"Do as I do, and drag them on."

"The storm will come back!"

"Do you mean to obey?"

"Do you order it?"

"The Father orders it!" answered Michael, for the first time invoking the all-powerful name of the Emperor.

"Forward, my swallows!" cried the iemschik, seizing one horse, while Michael did the same to the other.

Thus urged, the horses began to struggle onward. They could no longer

rear, and the middle horse not being hampered by the others, could keep in the center of the road. It was with the greatest difficulty that either man or beasts could stand against the wind, and for every three steps they took in advance, they lost one, and even two, by being forced backwards. They slipped, they fell, they got up again. The vehicle ran a great risk of being smashed. If the hood had not been securely fastened, it would have been blown away long before. Michael Strogoff and the iemschik took more than two hours in getting up this bit of road, only half a verst in length, so directly exposed was it to the lashing of the storm. The danger was not only from the wind which battered against the travelers, but from the avalanche of stones and broken trunks which were hurtling through the air.

Suddenly, during a flash of lightning, one of these masses was seen crashing and rolling down the mountain towards the tarantass. The iemschik uttered a cry.

Michael Strogoff in vain brought his whip down on the team, they refused to move.

A few feet farther on, and the mass would pass behind them! Michael saw the tarantass struck, his companion crushed; he saw there was no time to drag her from the vehicle.

Then, possessed in this hour of peril with superhuman strength, he threw himself behind it, and planting his feet on the ground, by main force

placed it out of danger.

The enormous mass as it passed grazed his chest, taking away his breath as though it had been a cannon-ball, then crushing to powder the flints on the road, it bounded into the abyss below.

"Oh, brother!" cried Nadia, who had seen it all by the light of the flashes.

"Nadia!" replied Michael, "fear nothing!"

"It is not on my own account that I fear!"

"God is with us, sister!"

"With me truly, brother, since He has sent thee in my way!" murmured the young girl.

The impetus the tarantass had received was not to be lost, and the tired horses once more moved forward. Dragged, so to speak, by Michael and the iemschik, they toiled on towards a narrow pass, lying north and south, where they would be protected from the direct sweep of the tempest. At one end a huge rock jutted out, round the summit of which whirled an eddy. Behind the shelter of the rock there was a comparative calm; yet once within the circumference of the cyclone, neither man nor beast could resist its power.

Indeed, some firs which towered above this protection were in a trice shorn of their tops, as though a gigantic scythe had swept across them. The storm was now at its height. The lightning filled the defile, and the thunderclaps had become one continued peal. The ground, struck by the concussion, trembled as though the whole Ural chain was shaken to its foundations.

Happily, the tarantass could be so placed that the storm might strike it obliquely. But the counter-currents, directed towards it by the slope, could not be so well avoided, and so violent were they that every instant it seemed as though it would be dashed to pieces.

Nadia was obliged to leave her seat, and Michael, by the light of one of the lanterns, discovered an excavation bearing the marks of a miner's pick, where the young girl could rest in safety until they could once more start.

Just then--it was one o'clock in the morning--the rain began to fall in torrents, and this in addition to the wind and lightning, made the storm truly frightful. To continue the journey at present was utterly impossible. Besides, having reached this pass, they had only to descend the slopes of the Ural Mountains, and to descend now, with the road torn up by a thousand mountain torrents, in these eddies of wind and rain, was utter madness.

"To wait is indeed serious," said Michael, "but it must certainly be done, to avoid still longer detentions. The very violence of the storm makes me hope that it will not last long. About three o'clock the day will begin to break, and the descent, which we cannot risk in the dark, we shall be able, if not with ease, at least without such danger, to attempt after sunrise."

"Let us wait, brother," replied Nadia; "but if you delay, let it not be to spare me fatigue or danger."

"Nadia, I know that you are ready to brave everything, but, in exposing both of us, I risk more than my life, more than yours, I am not fulfilling my task, that duty which before everything else I must accomplish."

"A duty!" murmured Nadia.

Just then a bright flash lit up the sky; a loud clap followed. The air was filled with sulphurous suffocating vapor, and a clump of huge pines, struck by the electric fluid, scarcely twenty feet from the tarantass, flared up like a gigantic torch.

The iemschik was struck to the ground by a counter-shock, but, regaining his feet, found himself happily unhurt.

Just as the last growlings of the thunder were lost in the recesses of

the mountain, Michael felt Nadia's hand pressing his, and he heard her whisper these words in his ear: "Cries, brother! Listen!"

CHAPTER XI TRAVELERS IN DISTRESS

DURING the momentary lull which followed, shouts could be distinctly heard from farther on, at no great distance from the tarantass. It was an earnest appeal, evidently from some traveler in distress.

Michael listened attentively. The iemschik also listened, but shook his head, as though it was impossible to help.

"They are travelers calling for aid," cried Nadia.

"They can expect nothing," replied the iemschik.

"Why not?" cried Michael. "Ought not we do for them what they would for us under similar circumstances?"

"Surely you will not risk the carriage and horses!"

"I will go on foot," replied Michael, interrupting the iemschik.

"I will go, too, brother," said the young girl.

"No, remain here, Nadia. The iemschik will stay with you. I do not wish to leave him alone."

"I will stay," replied Nadia.

"Whatever happens, do not leave this spot."

"You will find me where I now am."

Michael pressed her hand, and, turning the corner of the slope, disappeared in the darkness.

"Your brother is wrong," said the iemschik.

"He is right," replied Nadia simply.

Meanwhile Strogoff strode rapidly on. If he was in a great hurry to aid the travelers, he was also very anxious to know who it was that had not been hindered from starting by the storm; for he had no doubt that the cries came from the telga, which had so long preceded him.

The rain had stopped, but the storm was raging with redoubled fury. The shouts, borne on the air, became more distinct. Nothing was to be seen of the pass in which Nadia remained. The road wound along, and the squalls, checked by the corners, formed eddies highly dangerous, to pass which, without being taken off his legs, Michael had to use his utmost strength.

He soon perceived that the travelers whose shouts he had heard were at no great distance. Even then, on account of the darkness, Michael could

not see them, yet he heard distinctly their words.

This is what he heard, and what caused him some surprise: "Are you coming back, blockhead?"

"You shall have a taste of the knout at the next stage."

"Do you hear, you devil's postillion! Hullo! Below!"

"This is how a carriage takes you in this country!"

"Yes, this is what you call a telga!"

"Oh, that abominable driver! He goes on and does not appear to have discovered that he has left us behind!"

"To deceive me, too! Me, an honorable Englishman! I will make a complaint at the chancellor's office and have the fellow hanged."

This was said in a very angry tone, but was suddenly interrupted by a burst of laughter from his companion, who exclaimed, "Well! this is a good joke, I must say."

"You venture to laugh!" said the Briton angrily.

"Certainly, my dear confrere, and that most heartily. 'Pon my word I

never saw anything to come up to it."

Just then a crashing clap of thunder re-echoed through the defile, and then died away among the distant peaks. When the sound of the last growl had ceased, the merry voice went on: "Yes, it undoubtedly is a good joke. This machine certainly never came from France."

"Nor from England," replied the other.

On the road, by the light of the flashes, Michael saw, twenty yards from him, two travelers, seated side by side in a most peculiar vehicle, the wheels of which were deeply imbedded in the ruts formed in the road.

He approached them, the one grinning from ear to ear, and the other gloomily contemplating his situation, and recognized them as the two reporters who had been his companions on board the Caucasus.

"Good-morning to you, sir," cried the Frenchman. "Delighted to see you here. Let me introduce you to my intimate enemy, Mr. Blount."

The English reporter bowed, and was about to introduce in his turn his companion, Alcide Jolivet, in accordance with the rules of society, when Michael interrupted him.

"Perfectly unnecessary, sir; we already know each other, for we traveled together on the Volga."

"Ah, yes! exactly so! Mr.--"

"Nicholas Korpanoff, merchant, of Irkutsk. But may I know what has happened which, though a misfortune to your companion, amuses you so much?"

"Certainly, Mr. Korpanoff," replied Alcide. "Fancy! our driver has gone off with the front part of this confounded carriage, and left us quietly seated in the back part! So here we are in the worse half of a telga; no driver, no horses. Is it not a joke?"

"No joke at all," said the Englishman.

"Indeed it is, my dear fellow. You do not know how to look at the bright side of things."

"How, pray, are we to go on?" asked Blount.

"That is the easiest thing in the world," replied Alcide. "Go and harness yourself to what remains of our cart; I will take the reins, and call you my little pigeon, like a true iemschik, and you will trot off like a real post-horse."

"Mr. Jolivet," replied the Englishman, "this joking is going too far, it passes all limits and--"

"Now do be quiet, my dear sir. When you are done up, I will take your place; and call me a broken-winded snail and faint-hearted tortoise if I don't take you over the ground at a rattling pace."

Alcide said all this with such perfect good-humor that Michael could not help smiling. "Gentlemen," said he, "here is a better plan. We have now reached the highest ridge of the Ural chain, and thus have merely to descend the slopes of the mountain. My carriage is close by, only two hundred yards behind. I will lend you one of my horses, harness it to the remains of the telga, and to-mor-how, if no accident befalls us, we will arrive together at Ekaterenburg."

"That, Mr. Korpanoff," said Alcide, "is indeed a generous proposal."

"Indeed, sir," replied Michael, "I would willingly offer you places in my tarantass, but it will only hold two, and my sister and I already fill it."

"Really, sir," answered Alcide, "with your horse and our demi-telga we will go to the world's end."

"Sir," said Harry Blount, "we most willingly accept your kind offer. And, as to that iemschik--"

"Oh! I assure you that you are not the first travelers who have met with

a similar misfortune," replied Michael.

"But why should not our driver come back? He knows perfectly well that he has left us behind, wretch that he is!"

"He! He never suspected such a thing."

"What! the fellow not know that he was leaving the better half of his telga behind?"

"Not a bit, and in all good faith is driving the fore part into Ekaterenburg."

"Did I not tell you that it was a good joke, confrere?" cried Alcide.

"Then, gentlemen, if you will follow me," said Michael, "we will return to my carriage, and--"

"But the telga," observed the Englishman.

"There is not the slightest fear that it will fly away, my dear Blount!" exclaimed Alcide; "it has taken such good root in the ground, that if it were left here until next spring it would begin to bud."

"Come then, gentlemen," said Michael Strogoff, "and we will bring up the tarantass."

The Frenchman and the Englishman, descending from their seats, no longer the hinder one, since the front had taken its departure, followed Michael.

Walking along, Alcide Jolivet chattered away as usual, with his invariable good-humor. "Faith, Mr. Korpanoff," said he, "you have indeed got us out of a bad scrape."

"I have only done, sir," replied Michael, "what anyone would have done in my place."

"Well, sir, you have done us a good turn, and if you are going farther we may possibly meet again, and--"

Alcide Jolivet did not put any direct question to Michael as to where he was going, but the latter, not wishing it to be suspected that he had anything to conceal, at once replied, "I am bound for Omsk, gentlemen."

"Mr. Blount and I," replied Alcide, "go where danger is certainly to be found, and without doubt news also."

"To the invaded provinces?" asked Michael with some earnestness.

"Exactly so, Mr. Korpanoff; and we may possibly meet there."

"Indeed, sir," replied Michael, "I have little love for cannon-balls or lance points, and am by nature too great a lover of peace to venture where fighting is going on."

"I am sorry, sir, extremely sorry; we must only regret that we shall separate so soon! But on leaving Ekaterenburg it may be our fortunate fate to travel together, if only for a few days?"

"Do you go on to Omsk?" asked Michael, after a moment's reflection.

"We know nothing as yet," replied Alcide; "but we shall certainly go as far as Ishim, and once there, our movements must depend on circumstances."

"Well then, gentlemen," said Michael, "we will be fellow-travelers as far as Ishim."

Michael would certainly have preferred to travel alone, but he could not, without appearing at least singular, seek to separate himself from the two reporters, who were taking the same road that he was. Besides, since Alcide and his companion intended to make some stay at Ishim, he thought it rather convenient than otherwise to make that part of the journey in their company.

Then in an indifferent tone he asked, "Do you know, with any certainty, where this Tartar invasion is?"

"Indeed, sir," replied Alcide, "we only know what they said at Perm. Feofar-Khan's Tartars have invaded the whole province of Semipolatinsk, and for some days, by forced marches, have been descending the Irtish. You must hurry if you wish to get to Omsk before them."

"Indeed I must," replied Michael.

"It is reported also that Colonel Ogareff has succeeded in passing the frontier in disguise, and that he will not be slow in joining the Tartar chief in the revolted country."

"But how do they know it?" asked Michael, whom this news, more or less true, so directly concerned.

"Oh! as these things are always known," replied Alcide; "it is in the air."

"Then have you really reason to think that Colonel Ogareff is in Siberia?"

"I myself have heard it said that he was to take the road from Kasan to Ekaterenburg."

"Ah! you know that, Mr. Jolivet?" said Harry Blount, roused from his silence.

"I knew it," replied Alcide.

"And do you know that he went disguised as a gypsy!" asked Blount.

"As a gypsy!" exclaimed Michael, almost involuntarily, and he suddenly remembered the look of the old Bohemian at Nijni-Novgorod, his voyage on board the Caucasus, and his disembarking at Kasan.

"Just well enough to make a few remarks on the subject in a letter to my cousin," replied Alcide, smiling.

"You lost no time at Kasan," dryly observed the Englishman.

"No, my dear fellow! and while the Caucasus was laying in her supply of fuel, I was employed in obtaining a store of information."

Michael no longer listened to the repartee which Harry Blount and Alcide exchanged. He was thinking of the gypsy troupe, of the old Tsigane, whose face he had not been able to see, and of the strange woman who accompanied him, and then of the peculiar glance which she had cast at him. Suddenly, close by he heard a pistol-shot.

"Ah! forward, sirs!" cried he.

"Hullo!" said Alcide to himself, "this quiet merchant who always avoids

bullets is in a great hurry to go where they are flying about just now!"

Quickly followed by Harry Blount, who was not a man to be behind in danger, he dashed after Michael. In another instant the three were opposite the projecting rock which protected the tarantass at the turning of the road.

The clump of pines struck by the lightning was still burning. There was no one to be seen. However, Michael was not mistaken. Suddenly a dreadful growling was heard, and then another report.

"A bear;" cried Michael, who could not mistake the growling. "Nadia; Nadia!" And drawing his cutlass from his belt, Michael bounded round the buttress behind which the young girl had promised to wait.

The pines, completely enveloped in flames, threw a wild glare on the scene. As Michael reached the tarantass, a huge animal retreated towards him.

It was a monstrous bear. The tempest had driven it from the woods, and it had come to seek refuge in this cave, doubtless its habitual retreat, which Nadia then occupied.

Two of the horses, terrified at the presence of the enormous creature, breaking their traces, had escaped, and the iemschik, thinking only of his beasts, leaving Nadia face to face with the bear, had gone in

pursuit of them.

But the brave girl had not lost her presence of mind. The animal, which had not at first seen her, was attacking the remaining horse. Nadia, leaving the shelter in which she had been crouching, had run to the carriage, taken one of Michael's revolvers, and, advancing resolutely towards the bear, had fired close to it.

The animal, slightly wounded in the shoulder, turned on the girl, who rushed for protection behind the tarantass, but then, seeing that the horse was attempting to break its traces, and knowing that if it did so, and the others were not recovered, their journey could not be continued, with the most perfect coolness she again approached the bear, and, as it raised its paws to strike her down, gave it the contents of the second barrel.

This was the report which Michael had just heard. In an instant he was on the spot. Another bound and he was between the bear and the girl. His arm made one movement upwards, and the enormous beast, ripped up by that terrible knife, fell to the ground a lifeless mass. He had executed in splendid style the famous blow of the Siberian hunters, who endeavor not to damage the precious fur of the bear, which fetches a high price.

"You are not wounded, sister?" said Michael, springing to the side of the young girl.

"No, brother," replied Nadia.

At that moment the two journalists came up. Alcide seized the horse's head, and, in an instant, his strong wrist mastered it. His companion and he had seen Michael's rapid stroke. "Bravo!" cried Alcide; "for a simple merchant, Mr. Korpanoff, you handle the hunter's knife in a most masterly fashion."

"Most masterly, indeed," added Blount.

"In Siberia," replied Michael, "we are obliged to do a little of everything."

Alcide regarded him attentively. Seen in the bright glare, his knife dripping with blood, his tall figure, his foot firm on the huge carcass, he was indeed worth looking at.

"A formidable fellow," said Alcide to himself. Then advancing respectfully, he saluted the young girl.

Nadia bowed slightly.

Alcide turned towards his companion. "The sister worthy of the brother!" said he. "Now, were I a bear, I should not meddle with two so brave and so charming."

Harry Blount, perfectly upright, stood, hat in hand, at some distance. His companion's easy manners only increased his usual stiffness.

At that moment the iemschik, who had succeeded in recapturing his two horses, reappeared. He cast a regretful glance at the magnificent animal lying on the ground, loth to leave it to the birds of prey, and then proceeded once more to harness his team.

Michael acquainted him with the travelers' situation, and his intention of loaning one of the horses.

"As you please," replied the iemschik. "Only, you know, two carriages instead of one."

"All right, my friend," said Alcide, who understood the insinuation, "we will pay double."

"Then gee up, my turtle-doves!" cried the iemschik.

Nadia again took her place in the tarantass. Michael and his companions followed on foot. It was three o'clock. The storm still swept with terrific violence across the defile. When the first streaks of daybreak appeared the tarantass had reached the telga, which was still conscientiously imbedded as far as the center of the wheel. Such being the case, it can be easily understood how a sudden jerk would separate the front from the hinder part. One of the horses was now harnessed by

means of cords to the remains of the telga, the reporters took their place on the singular equipage, and the two carriages started off. They had now only to descend the Ural slopes, in doing which there was not the slightest difficulty.

Six hours afterwards the two vehicles, the tarantass preceding the telga, arrived at Ekaterenburg, nothing worthy of note having happened in the descent.

The first person the reporters perceived at the door of the post-house was their iemschik, who appeared to be waiting for them. This worthy Russian had a fine open countenance, and he smilingly approached the travelers, and, holding out his hand, in a quiet tone he demanded the usual "pour-boire."

This very cool request roused Blount's ire to its highest pitch, and had not the iemschik prudently retreated, a straight-out blow of the fist, in true British boxing style, would have paid his claim of "na vodkou."

Alcide Jolivet, at this burst of anger, laughed as he had never laughed before.

"But the poor devil is quite right!" he cried. "He is perfectly right, my dear fellow. It is not his fault if we did not know how to follow him!"

Then drawing several copecks from his pocket, "Here my friend," said he, handing them to the iemschik; "take them. If you have not earned them, that is not your fault."

This redoubled Mr. Blount's irritation. He even began to speak of a lawsuit against the owner of the telga.

"A lawsuit in Russia, my dear fellow!" cried Alcide. "Things must indeed change should it ever be brought to a conclusion! Did you never hear the story of the wet-nurse who claimed payment of twelve months' nursing of some poor little infant?"

"I never heard it," replied Harry Blount.

"Then you do not know what that suckling had become by the time judgment was given in favor of the nurse?"

"What was he, pray?"

"Colonel of the Imperial Guard!"

At this reply all burst into a laugh.

Alcide, enchanted with his own joke, drew out his notebook, and in it wrote the following memorandum, destined to figure in a forthcoming French and Russian dictionary: "Telga, a Russian carriage with four

wheels, that is when it starts; with two wheels, when it arrives at its destination."

CHAPTER XII PROVOCATION

EKATERENBURG, geographically, is an Asiatic city; for it is situated beyond the Ural Mountains, on the farthest eastern slopes of the chain. Nevertheless, it belongs to the government of Perm; and, consequently, is included in one of the great divisions of European Russia. It is as though a morsel of Siberia lay in Russian jaws.

Neither Michael nor his companions were likely to experience the slightest difficulty in obtaining means of continuing their journey in so large a town as Ekaterenburg. It was founded in 1723, and has since become a place of considerable size, for in it is the chief mint of the empire. There also are the headquarters of the officials employed in the management of the mines. Thus the town is the center of an important district, abounding in manufactories principally for the working and refining of gold and platina.

Just now the population of Ekaterenburg had greatly increased; many Russians and Siberians, menaced by the Tartar invasion, having collected there. Thus, though it had been so troublesome a matter to find horses and vehicles when going to Ekaterenburg, there was no difficulty in leaving it; for under present circumstances few travelers cared to venture on the Siberian roads.

So it happened that Blount and Alcide had not the slightest trouble in replacing, by a sound telga, the famous demi-carriage which had managed

to take them to Ekaterenburg. As to Michael, he retained his tarantass, which was not much the worse for its journey across the Urals; and he had only to harness three good horses to it to take him swiftly over the road to Irkutsk.

As far as Tioumen, and even up to Novo-Zaimskoe, this road has slight inclines, which gentle undulations are the first signs of the slopes of the Ural Mountains. But after Novo-Zaimskoe begins the immense steppe.

At Ichim, as we have said, the reporters intended to stop, that is at about four hundred and twenty miles from Ekaterenburg. There they intended to be guided by circumstances as to their route across the invaded country, either together or separately, according as their news-hunting instinct set them on one track or another.

This road from Ekaterenburg to Ichim--which passes through Irkutsk--was the only one which Michael could take. But, as he did not run after news, and wished, on the contrary, to avoid the country devastated by the invaders, he determined to stop nowhere.

"I am very happy to make part of my journey in your company," said he to his new companions, "but I must tell you that I am most anxious to reach Omsk; for my sister and I are going to rejoin our mother. Who can say whether we shall arrive before the Tartars reach the town! I must therefore stop at the post-houses only long enough to change horses, and must travel day and night."

"That is exactly what we intend doing," replied Blount.

"Good," replied Michael; "but do not lose an instant. Buy or hire a carriage whose--"

"Whose hind wheels," added Alcide, "are warranted to arrive at the same time as its front wheels."

Half an hour afterwards the energetic Frenchman had found a tarantass in which he and his companion at once seated themselves. Michael and Nadia once more entered their own carriage, and at twelve o'clock the two vehicles left the town of Ekaterenburg together.

Nadia was at last in Siberia, on that long road which led to Irkutsk. What must then have been the thoughts of the young girl? Three strong swift horses were taking her across that land of exile where her parent was condemned to live, for how long she knew not, and so far from his native land. But she scarcely noticed those long steppes over which the tarantass was rolling, and which at one time she had despaired of ever seeing, for her eyes were gazing at the horizon, beyond which she knew her banished father was. She saw nothing of the country across which she was traveling at the rate of fifteen versts an hour; nothing of these regions of Western Siberia, so different from those of the east. Here, indeed, were few cultivated fields; the soil was poor, at least at the surface, but in its bowels lay hid quantities of iron, copper, platina,

and gold. How can hands be found to cultivate the land, when it pays better to burrow beneath the earth? The pickaxe is everywhere at work; the spade nowhere.

However, Nadia's thoughts sometimes left the provinces of Lake Baikal, and returned to her present situation. Her father's image faded away, and was replaced by that of her generous companion as he first appeared on the Vladimir railroad. She recalled his attentions during that journey, his arrival at the police-station, the hearty simplicity with which he had called her sister, his kindness to her in the descent of the Volga, and then all that he did for her on that terrible night of the storm in the Urals, when he saved her life at the peril of his own.

Thus Nadia thought of Michael. She thanked God for having given her such a gallant protector, a friend so generous and wise. She knew that she was safe with him, under his protection. No brother could have done more than he. All obstacles seemed cleared away; the performance of her journey was but a matter of time.

Michael remained buried in thought. He also thanked God for having brought about this meeting with Nadia, which at the same time enabled him to do a good action, and afforded him additional means for concealing his true character. He delighted in the young girl's calm intrepidity. Was she not indeed his sister? His feeling towards his beautiful and brave companion was rather respect than affection. He felt that hers was one of those pure and rare hearts which are held by all in

high esteem.

However, Michael's dangers were now beginning, since he had reached Siberian ground. If the reporters were not mistaken, if Ivan Ogareff had really passed the frontier, all his actions must be made with extreme caution. Things were now altered; Tartar spies swarmed in the Siberian provinces. His incognito once discovered, his character as courier of the Czar known, there was an end of his journey, and probably of his life. Michael felt now more than ever the weight of his responsibility.

While such were the thoughts of those occupying the first carriage, what was happening in the second? Nothing out of the way. Alcide spoke in sentences; Blount replied by monosyllables. Each looked at everything in his own light, and made notes of such incidents as occurred on the journey--few and but slightly varied--while they crossed the provinces of Western Siberia.

At each relay the reporters descended from their carriage and found themselves with Michael. Except when meals were to be taken at the post-houses, Nadia did not leave the tarantass. When obliged to breakfast or dine, she sat at table, but was always very reserved, and seldom joined in conversation.

Alcide, without going beyond the limits of strict propriety, showed that he was greatly struck by the young girl. He admired the silent energy which she showed in bearing all the fatigues of so difficult a journey.

The forced stoppages were anything but agreeable to Michael; so he hastened the departure at each relay, roused the innkeepers, urged on the iemschiks, and expedited the harnessing of the tarantass. Then the hurried meal over--always much too hurried to agree with Blount, who was a methodical eater--they started, and were driven as eagles, for they paid like princes.

It need scarcely be said that Blount did not trouble himself about the girl at table. That gentleman was not in the habit of doing two things at once. She was also one of the few subjects of conversation which he did not care to discuss with his companion.

Alcide having asked him, on one occasion, how old he thought the girl, "What girl?" he replied, quite seriously.

"Why, Nicholas Korpanoff's sister."

"Is she his sister?"

"No; his grandmother!" replied Alcide, angry at his indifference. "What age should you consider her?"

"Had I been present at her birth I might have known."

Very few of the Siberian peasants were to be seen in the fields. These

peasants are remarkable for their pale, grave faces, which a celebrated traveler has compared to those of the Castilians, without the haughtiness of the latter. Here and there some villages already deserted indicated the approach of the Tartar hordes. The inhabitants, having driven off their flocks of sheep, their camels, and their horses, were taking refuge in the plains of the north. Some tribes of the wandering Kirghiz, who remained faithful, had transported their tents beyond the Irtych, to escape the depredations of the invaders.

Happily, post traveling was as yet uninterrupted; and telegraphic communication could still be effected between places connected with the wire. At each relay horses were to be had on the usual conditions. At each telegraphic station the clerks transmitted messages delivered to them, delaying for State dispatches alone.

Thus far, then, Michael's journey had been accomplished satisfactorily. The courier of the Czar had in no way been impeded; and, if he could only get on to Krasnoiarsk, which seemed the farthest point attained by Feofar-Khan's Tartars, he knew that he could arrive at Irkutsk, before them. The day after the two carriages had left Ekaterenburg they reached the small town of Toulouguisk at seven o'clock in the morning, having covered two hundred and twenty versts, no event worthy of mention having occurred. The same evening, the 22d of July, they arrived at Tioumen.

Tioumen, whose population is usually ten thousand inhabitants, then contained double that number. This, the first industrial town

established by the Russians in Siberia, in which may be seen a fine metal-refining factory and a bell foundry, had never before presented such an animated appearance. The correspondents immediately went off after news. That brought by Siberian fugitives from the seat of war was far from reassuring. They said, amongst other things, that Feofar-Khan's army was rapidly approaching the valley of the Ichim, and they confirmed the report that the Tartar chief was soon to be joined by Colonel Ogareff, if he had not been so already. Hence the conclusion was that operations would be pushed in Eastern Siberia with the greatest activity. However, the loyal Cossacks of the government of Tobolsk were advancing by forced marches towards Tomsk, in the hope of cutting off the Tartar columns.

At midnight the town of Novo-Saimsk was reached; and the travelers now left behind them the country broken by tree-covered hills, the last remains of the Urals.

Here began the regular Siberian steppe which extends to the neighborhood of Krasnoiarsk. It is a boundless plain, a vast grassy desert; earth and sky here form a circle as distinct as that traced by a sweep of the compasses. The steppe presents nothing to attract notice but the long line of the telegraph posts, their wires vibrating in the breeze like the strings of a harp. The road could be distinguished from the rest of the plain only by the clouds of fine dust which rose under the wheels of the tarantass. Had it not been for this white riband, which stretched away as far as the eye could reach, the travelers might have thought

themselves in a desert.

Michael and his companions again pressed rapidly forward. The horses, urged on by the iemschik, seemed to fly over the ground, for there was not the slightest obstacle to impede them. The tarantass was going straight for Ichim, where the two correspondents intended to stop, if nothing happened to make them alter their plans.

A hundred and twenty miles separated Novo-Saimsk from the town of Ichim, and before eight o'clock the next evening the distance could and should be accomplished if no time was lost. In the opinion of the iemschiks, should the travelers not be great lords or high functionaries, they were worthy of being so, if it was only for their generosity in the matter of "na vodkou."

On the afternoon of the next day, the 23rd of July, the two carriages were not more than thirty versts from Ichim. Suddenly Michael caught sight of a carriage--scarcely visible among the clouds of dust--preceding them along the road. As his horses were evidently less fatigued than those of the other traveler, he would not be long in overtaking it. This was neither a tarantass nor a telga, but a post-berlin, which looked as if it had made a long journey. The postillion was thrashing his horses with all his might, and only kept them at a gallop by dint of abuse and blows. The berlin had certainly not passed through Novo-Saimsk, and could only have struck the Irkutsk road by some less frequented route across the steppe.

Our travelers' first thought, on seeing this berlin, was to get in front of it, and arrive first at the relay, so as to make sure of fresh horses. They said a word to their iemschiks, who soon brought them up with the berlin.

Michael Strogoff came up first. As he passed, a head was thrust out of the window of the berlin.

He had not time to see what it was like, but as he dashed by he distinctly heard this word, uttered in an imperious tone: "Stop!"

But they did not stop; on the contrary, the berlin was soon distanced by the two tarantasses.

It now became a regular race; for the horses of the berlin--no doubt excited by the sight and pace of the others--recovered their strength and kept up for some minutes. The three carriages were hidden in a cloud of dust. From this cloud issued the cracking of whips mingled with excited shouts and exclamations of anger.

Nevertheless, the advantage remained with Michael and his companions, which might be very important to them if the relay was poorly provided with horses. Two carriages were perhaps more than the postmaster could provide for, at least in a short space of time.

Half an hour after the berlin was left far behind, looking only a speck on the horizon of the steppe.

It was eight o'clock in the evening when the two carriages reached Ichim. The news was worse and worse with regard to the invasion. The town itself was menaced by the Tartar vanguard; and two days before the authorities had been obliged to retreat to Tobolsk. There was not an officer nor a soldier left in Ichim.

On arriving at the relay, Michael Strogoff immediately asked for horses. He had been fortunate in distancing the berlin. Only three horses were fit to be harnessed. The others had just come in worn out from a long stage.

As the two correspondents intended to stop at Ichim, they had not to trouble themselves to find transport, and had their carriage put away. In ten minutes Michael was told that his tarantass was ready to start.

"Good," said he.

Then turning to the two reporters: "Well, gentlemen, the time is come for us to separate."

"What, Mr. Korpanoff," said Alcide Jolivet, "shall you not stop even for an hour at Ichim?"

"No, sir; and I also wish to leave the post-house before the arrival of the berlin which we distanced."

"Are you afraid that the traveler will dispute the horses with you?"

"I particularly wish to avoid any difficulty."

"Then, Mr. Korpanoff," said Jolivet, "it only remains for us to thank you once more for the service you rendered us, and the pleasure we have had in traveling with you."

"It is possible that we shall meet you again in a few days at Omsk," added Blount.

"It is possible," answered Michael, "since I am going straight there."

"Well, I wish you a safe journey, Mr. Korpanoff," said Alcide, "and Heaven preserve you from telgas."

The two reporters held out their hands to Michael with the intention of cordially shaking his, when the sound of a carriage was heard outside. Almost immediately the door was flung open and a man appeared.

It was the traveler of the berlin, a military-looking man, apparently about forty years of age, tall, robust in figure, broad-shouldered, with a strongly-set head, and thick mus-taches meeting red whiskers. He wore

a plain uniform. A cavalry saber hung at his side, and in his hand he held a short-handled whip.

"Horses," he demanded, with the air of a man accustomed to command.

"I have no more disposable horses," answered the postmaster, bowing.

"I must have some this moment."

"It is impossible."

"What are those horses which have just been harnessed to the tarantass I saw at the door?"

"They belong to this traveler," answered the postmaster, pointing to Michael Strogoff.

"Take them out!" said the traveler in a tone which admitted of no reply.

Michael then advanced.

"These horses are engaged by me," he said.

"What does that matter? I must have them. Come, be quick; I have no time to lose."

"I have no time to lose either," replied Michael, restraining himself with difficulty.

Nadia was near him, calm also, but secretly uneasy at a scene which it would have been better to avoid.

"Enough!" said the traveler. Then, going up to the postmaster, "Let the horses be put into my berlin," he exclaimed with a threatening gesture.

The postmaster, much embarrassed, did not know whom to obey, and looked at Michael, who evidently had the right to resist the unjust demands of the traveler.

Michael hesitated an instant. He did not wish to make use of his podorojna, which would have drawn attention to him, and he was most unwilling also, by giving up his horses, to delay his journey, and yet he must not engage in a struggle which might compromise his mission.

The two reporters looked at him ready to support him should he appeal to them.

"My horses will remain in my carriage," said Michael, but without raising his tone more than would be suitable for a plain Irkutsk merchant.

The traveler advanced towards Michael and laid his hand heavily on his

shoulder. "Is it so?" he said roughly. "You will not give up your horses to me?"

"No," answered Michael.

"Very well, they shall belong to whichever of us is able to start. Defend yourself; I shall not spare you!"

So saying, the traveler drew his saber from its sheath, and Nadia threw herself before Michael.

Blount and Alcide Jolivet advanced towards him.

"I shall not fight," said Michael quietly, folding his arms across his chest.

"You will not fight?"

"No."

"Not even after this?" exclaimed the traveler. And before anyone could prevent him, he struck Michael's shoulder with the handle of the whip. At this insult Michael turned deadly pale. His hands moved convulsively as if he would have knocked the brute down. But by a tremendous effort he mastered himself. A duel! it was more than a delay; it was perhaps the failure of his mission. It would be better to lose some hours. Yes;

but to swallow this affront!

"Will you fight now, coward?" repeated the traveler, adding coarseness to brutality.

"No," answered Michael, without moving, but looking the other straight in the face.

"The horses this moment," said the man, and left the room.

The postmaster followed him, after shrugging his shoulders and bestowing on Michael a glance of anything but approbation.

The effect produced on the reporters by this incident was not to Michael's advantage. Their discomfiture was visible. How could this strong young man allow himself to be struck like that and not demand satisfaction for such an insult? They contented themselves with bowing to him and retired, Jolivet remarking to Harry Blount

"I could not have believed that of a man who is so skillful in finishing up Ural Mountain bears. Is it the case that a man can be courageous at one time and a coward at another? It is quite incomprehensible."

A moment afterwards the noise of wheels and whip showed that the berlin, drawn by the tarantass' horses, was driving rapidly away from the post-house.

Nadia, unmoved, and Michael, still quivering, remained alone in the room. The courier of the Czar, his arms crossed over his chest was seated motionless as a statue. A color, which could not have been the blush of shame, had replaced the paleness on his countenance.

Nadia did not doubt that powerful reasons alone could have allowed him to suffer so great a humiliation from such a man. Going up to him as he had come to her in the police-station at Nijni-Novgorod:

"Your hand, brother," said she.

And at the same time her hand, with an almost maternal gesture, wiped away a tear which sprang to her companion's eye.

CHAPTER XIII DUTY BEFORE EVERYTHING

NADIA, with the clear perception of a right-minded woman, guessed that some secret motive directed all Michael Strogoff's actions; that he, for a reason unknown to her, did not belong to himself; and that in this instance especially he had heroically sacrificed to duty even his resentment at the gross injury he had received.

Nadia, therefore, asked no explanation from Michael. Had not the hand which she had extended to him already replied to all that he might have been able to tell her?

Michael remained silent all the evening. The postmaster not being able to supply them with fresh horses until the next morning, a whole night must be passed at the house. Nadia could profit by it to take some rest, and a room was therefore prepared for her.

The young girl would no doubt have preferred not to leave her companion, but she felt that he would rather be alone, and she made ready to go to her room.

Just as she was about to retire she could not refrain from going up to Michael to say good-night.

"Brother," she whispered. But he checked her with a gesture. The girl sighed and left the room.

Michael Strogoff did not lie down. He could not have slept even for an hour. The place on which he had been struck by the brutal traveler felt like a burn.

"For my country and the Father," he muttered as he ended his evening prayer.

He especially felt a great wish to know who was the man who had struck him, whence he came, and where he was going. As to his face, the features of it were so deeply engraven on his memory that he had no fear of ever forgetting them.

Michael Strogoff at last asked for the postmaster. The latter, a Siberian of the old type, came directly, and looking rather contemptuously at the young man, waited to be questioned.

"You belong to the country?" asked Michael.

"Yes."

"Do you know that man who took my horses?"

"No."

"Had you never seen him before?"

"Never."

"Who do you think he was?"

"A man who knows how to make himself obeyed."

Michael fixed his piercing gaze upon the Siberian, but the other did not quail before it.

"Do you dare to judge me?" exclaimed Michael.

"Yes," answered the Siberian, "there are some things even a plain merchant cannot receive without returning."

"Blows?"

"Blows, young man. I am of an age and strength to tell you so."

Michael went up to the postmaster and laid his two powerful hands on his shoulders.

Then in a peculiarly calm tone, "Be off, my friend," said he: "be off! I could kill you."

The postmaster understood. "I like him better for that," he muttered and

retired without another word.

At eight o'clock the next morning, the 24th of July, three strong horses were harnessed to the tarantass. Michael Strogoff and Nadia took their places, and Ichim, with its disagreeable remembrances, was soon left far behind.

At the different relays at which they stopped during the day Strogoff ascertained that the berlin still preceded them on the road to Irkutsk, and that the traveler, as hurried as they were, never lost a minute in pursuing his way across the steppe.

At four o'clock in the evening they reached Abatskaia, fifty miles farther on, where the Ichim, one of the principal affluents of the Irtych, had to be crossed. This passage was rather more difficult than that of the Tobol. Indeed the current of the Ichim was very rapid just at that place. During the Siberian winter, the rivers being all frozen to a thickness of several feet, they are easily practicable, and the traveler even crosses them without being aware of the fact, for their beds have disappeared under the snowy sheet spread uniformly over the steppe; but in summer the difficulties of crossing are sometimes great.

In fact, two hours were taken up in making the passage of the Ichim, which much exasperated Michael, especially as the boatmen gave them alarming news of the Tartar invasion. Some of Feofar-Khan's scouts had already appeared on both banks of the lower Ichim, in the southern parts

of the government of Tobolsk. Omsk was threatened. They spoke of an engagement which had taken place between the Siberian and Tartar troops on the frontier of the great Kirghese horde--an engagement not to the advantage of the Russians, who were weak in numbers. The troops had retreated thence, and in consequence there had been a general emigration of all the peasants of the province. The boatmen spoke of horrible atrocities committed by the invaders--pillage, theft, incendiarism, murder. Such was the system of Tartar warfare.

The people all fled before Feofar-Khan. Michael Strogoff's great fear was lest, in the depopulation of the towns, he should be unable to obtain the means of transport. He was therefore extremely anxious to reach Omsk. Perhaps there they would get the start of the Tartar scouts, who were coming down the valley of the Irtych, and would find the road open to Irkutsk.

Just at the place where the tarantass crossed the river ended what is called, in military language, the "Ichim chain"--a chain of towers, or little wooden forts, extending from the southern frontier of Siberia for a distance of nearly four hundred versts. Formerly these forts were occupied by detachments of Cossacks, and they protected the country against the Kirghese, as well as against the Tartars. But since the Muscovite Government had believed these hordes reduced to absolute submission, they had been abandoned, and now could not be used; just at the time when they were needed. Many of these forts had been reduced to ashes; and the boatmen even pointed out the smoke to Michael, rising

in the southern horizon, and showing the approach of the Tartar advance-guard.

As soon as the ferryboat landed the tarantass on the right bank of the Ichim, the journey across the steppe was resumed with all speed. Michael Strogoff remained very silent. He was, however, always attentive to Nadia, helping her to bear the fatigue of this long journey without break or rest; but the girl never complained. She longed to give wings to the horses. Something told her that her companion was even more anxious than herself to reach Irkutsk; and how many versts were still between!

It also occurred to her that if Omsk was entered by the Tartars, Michael's mother, who lived there, would be in danger, and that this was sufficient to explain her son's impatience to get to her.

Nadia at last spoke to him of old Marfa, and of how unprotected she would be in the midst of all these events.

"Have you received any news of your mother since the beginning of the invasion?" she asked.

"None, Nadia. The last letter my mother wrote to me contained good news. Marfa is a brave and energetic Siberian woman. Notwithstanding her age, she has preserved all her moral strength. She knows how to suffer."

"I shall see her, brother," said Nadia quickly. "Since you give me the name of sister, I am Marfa's daughter."

And as Michael did not answer she added:

"Perhaps your mother has been able to leave Omsk?"

"It is possible, Nadia," replied Michael; "and I hope she may have reached Tobolsk. Marfa hates the Tartars. She knows the steppe, and would have no fear in just taking her staff and going down the banks of the Irtych. There is not a spot in all the province unknown to her. Many times has she traveled all over the country with my father; and many times I myself, when a mere child, have accompanied them across the Siberian desert. Yes, Nadia, I trust that my mother has left Omsk."

"And when shall you see her?"

"I shall see her--on my return."

"If, however, your mother is still at Omsk, you will be able to spare an hour to go to her?"

"I shall not go and see her."

"You will not see her?"

"No, Nadia," said Michael, his chest heaving as he felt he could not go on replying to the girl's questions.

"You say no! Why, brother, if your mother is still at Omsk, for what reason could you refuse to see her?"

"For what reason, Nadia? You ask me for what reason," exclaimed Michael, in so changed a voice that the young girl started. "For the same reason as that which made me patient even to cowardice with the villain who--" He could not finish his sentence.

"Calm yourself, brother," said Nadia in a gentle voice. "I only know one thing, or rather I do not know it, I feel it. It is that all your conduct is now directed by the sentiment of a duty more sacred--if there can be one--than that which unites the son to the mother."

Nadia was silent, and from that moment avoided every subject which in any way touched on Michael's peculiar situation. He had a secret motive which she must respect. She respected it.

The next day, July 25th, at three o'clock in the morning, the tarantass arrived at Tioukalmsk, having accomplished a distance of eighty miles since it had crossed the Ichim. They rapidly changed horses. Here, however, for the first time, the iemschik made difficulties about starting, declaring that detachments of Tartars were roving across the steppe, and that travelers, horses, and carriages would be a fine prize

for them.

Only by dint of a large bribe could Michael get over the unwillingness of the iemschik, for in this instance, as in many others, he did not wish to show his podorojna. The last ukase, having been transmitted by telegraph, was known in the Siberian provinces; and a Russian specially exempted from obeying these words would certainly have drawn public attention to himself--a thing above all to be avoided by the Czar's courier. As to the iemschik's hesitation, either the rascal traded on the traveler's impatience or he really had good reason to fear.

However, at last the tarantass started, and made such good way that by three in the afternoon it had reached Koulatsinskoe, fifty miles farther on. An hour after this it was on the banks of the Irtych. Omsk was now only fourteen miles distant.

The Irtych is a large river, and one of the principal of those which flow towards the north of Asia. Rising in the Altai Mountains, it flows from the southeast to the northwest and empties itself into the Obi, after a course of four thousand miles.

At this time of year, when all the rivers of the Siberian basin are much swollen, the waters of the Irtych were very high. In consequence the current was changed to a regular torrent, rendering the passage difficult enough. A swimmer could not have crossed, however powerful; and even in a ferryboat there would be some danger.

But Michael and Nadia, determined to brave all perils whatever they might be, did not dream of shrinking from this one. Michael proposed to his young companion that he should cross first, embarking in the ferryboat with the tarantass and horses, as he feared that the weight of this load would render it less safe. After landing the carriage he would return and fetch Nadia.

The girl refused. It would be the delay of an hour, and she would not, for her safety alone, be the cause of it.

The embarkation was made not without difficulty, for the banks were partly flooded and the boat could not get in near enough. However, after half an hour's exertion, the boatmen got the tarantass and the three horses on board. The passengers embarked also, and they shoved off.

For a few minutes all went well. A little way up the river the current was broken by a long point projecting from the bank, and forming an eddy easily crossed by the boat. The two boatmen propelled their barge with long poles, which they handled cleverly; but as they gained the middle of the stream it grew deeper and deeper, until at last they could only just reach the bottom. The ends of the poles were only a foot above the water, which rendered their use difficult. Michael and Nadia, seated in the stern of the boat, and always in dread of a delay, watched the boatmen with some uneasiness.

"Look out!" cried one of them to his comrade.

The shout was occasioned by the new direction the boat was rapidly taking. It had got into the direct current and was being swept down the river. By diligent use of the poles, putting the ends in a series of notches cut below the gunwale, the boatmen managed to keep the craft against the stream, and slowly urged it in a slanting direction towards the right bank.

They calculated on reaching it some five or six versts below the landing place; but, after all, that would not matter so long as men and beasts could disembark without accident. The two stout boatmen, stimulated moreover by the promise of double fare, did not doubt of succeeding in this difficult passage of the Irtych.

But they reckoned without an accident which they were powerless to prevent, and neither their zeal nor their skill-fulness could, under the circumstances, have done more.

The boat was in the middle of the current, at nearly equal distances from either shore, and being carried down at the rate of two versts an hour, when Michael, springing to his feet, bent his gaze up the river.

Several boats, aided by oars as well as by the current, were coming swiftly down upon them.

Michael's brow contracted, and a cry escaped him.

"What is the matter?" asked the girl.

But before Michael had time to reply one of the boatmen exclaimed in an accent of terror:

"The Tartars! the Tartars!"

There were indeed boats full of soldiers, and in a few minutes they must reach the ferryboat, it being too heavily laden to escape from them.

The terrified boatmen uttered exclamations of despair and dropped their poles.

"Courage, my friends!" cried Michael; "courage! Fifty roubles for you if we reach the right bank before the boats overtake us."

Incited by these words, the boatmen again worked manfully but it soon become evident that they could not escape the Tartars.

It was scarcely probable that they would pass without attacking them. On the contrary, there was everything to be feared from robbers such as these.

"Do not be afraid, Nadia," said Michael; "but be ready for anything."

"I am ready," replied Nadia.

"Even to leap into the water when I tell you?"

"Whenever you tell me."

"Have confidence in me, Nadia."

"I have, indeed!"

The Tartar boats were now only a hundred feet distant. They carried a detachment of Bokharian soldiers, on their way to reconnoiter around Omsk.

The ferryboat was still two lengths from the shore. The boatmen redoubled their efforts. Michael himself seized a pole and wielded it with superhuman strength. If he could land the tarantass and horses, and dash off with them, there was some chance of escaping the Tartars, who were not mounted.

But all their efforts were in vain. "Saryn na kitchou!" shouted the soldiers from the first boat.

Michael recognized the Tartar war-cry, which is usually answered by lying flat on the ground. As neither he nor the boatmen obeyed a volley

was let fly, and two of the horses were mortally wounded.

At the next moment a violent blow was felt. The boats had run into the ferryboat.

"Come, Nadia!" cried Michael, ready to jump overboard.

The girl was about to follow him, when a blow from a lance struck him, and he was thrown into the water. The current swept him away, his hand raised for an instant above the waves, and then he disappeared.

Nadia uttered a cry, but before she had time to throw herself after him she was seized and dragged into one of the boats. The boatmen were killed, the ferryboat left to drift away, and the Tartars continued to descend the Irtych.

CHAPTER XIV MOTHER AND SON

OMSK is the official capital of Western Siberia. It is not the most important city of the government of that name, for Tomsk has more inhabitants and is larger. But it is at Omsk that the Governor-General of this the first half of Asiatic Russia resides. Omsk, properly so called, is composed of two distinct towns: one which is exclusively inhabited by the authorities and officials; the other more especially devoted to the Siberian merchants, although, indeed, the trade of the town is of small importance.

This city has about 12,000 to 13,000 inhabitants. It is defended by walls, but these are merely of earth, and could afford only insufficient protection. The Tartars, who were well aware of this fact, consequently tried at this period to carry it by main force, and in this they succeeded, after an investment of a few days.

The garrison of Omsk, reduced to two thousand men, resisted valiantly. But driven back, little by little, from the mercantile portion of the place, they were compelled to take refuge in the upper town.

It was there that the Governor-General, his officers, and soldiers had entrenched themselves. They had made the upper quarter of Omsk a kind of citadel, and hitherto they held out well in this species of improvised "kreml," but without much hope of the promised succor. The Tartar troops, who were descending the Irtych, received every day fresh

reinforcements, and, what was more serious, they were led by an officer, a traitor to his country, but a man of much note, and of an audacity equal to any emergency. This man was Colonel Ivan Ogareff.

Ivan Ogareff, terrible as any of the most savage Tartar chieftains, was an educated soldier. Possessing on his mother's side some Mongolian blood, he delighted in deceptive strategy and ambuscades, stopping short of nothing when he desired to fathom some secret or to set some trap. Deceitful by nature, he willingly had recourse to the vilest trickery; lying when occasion demanded, excelling in the adoption of all disguises and in every species of deception. Further, he was cruel, and had even acted as an executioner. Feofar-Khan possessed in him a lieutenant well capable of seconding his designs in this savage war.

When Michael Strogoff arrived on the banks of the Irtych, Ivan Ogareff was already master of Omsk, and was pressing the siege of the upper quarter of the town all the more eagerly because he must hasten to Tomsk, where the main body of the Tartar army was concentrated.

Tomsk, in fact, had been taken by Feofar-Khan some days previously, and it was thence that the invaders, masters of Central Siberia, were to march upon Irkutsk.

Irkutsk was the real object of Ivan Ogareff. The plan of the traitor was to reach the Grand Duke under a false name, to gain his confidence, and to deliver into Tartar hands the town and the Grand Duke himself. With

such a town, and such a hostage, all Asiatic Siberia must necessarily fall into the hands of the invaders. Now it was known that the Czar was acquainted with this conspiracy, and that it was for the purpose of baffling it that a courier had been intrusted with the important warning. Hence, therefore, the very stringent instructions which had been given to the young courier to pass incognito through the invaded district.

This mission he had so far faithfully performed, but now could he carry it to a successful completion?

The blow which had struck Michael Strogoff was not mortal. By swimming in a manner by which he had effectually concealed himself, he had reached the right bank, where he fell exhausted among the bushes.

When he recovered his senses, he found himself in the cabin of a mujik, who had picked him up and cared for him. For how long a time had he been the guest of this brave Siberian? He could not guess. But when he opened his eyes he saw the handsome bearded face bending over him, and regarding him with pitying eyes. "Do not speak, little father," said the mujik, "Do not speak! Thou art still too weak. I will tell thee where thou art and everything that has passed."

And the mujik related to Michael Strogoff the different incidents of the struggle which he had witnessed--the attack upon the ferry by the Tartar boats, the pillage of the tarantass, and the massacre of the boatmen.

But Michael Strogoff listened no longer, and slipping his hand under his garment he felt the imperial letter still secured in his breast. He breathed a sigh of relief.

But that was not all. "A young girl accompanied me," said he.

"They have not killed her," replied the mujik, anticipating the anxiety which he read in the eyes of his guest. "They have carried her off in their boat, and have continued the descent of Irtych. It is only one prisoner more to join the many they are taking to Tomsk!"

Michael Strogoff was unable to reply. He pressed his hand upon his heart to restrain its beating. But, notwithstanding these many trials, the sentiment of duty mastered his whole soul. "Where am I?" asked he.

"Upon the right bank of the Irtych, only five versts from Omsk," replied the mujik.

"What wound can I have received which could have thus prostrated me? It was not a gunshot wound?"

"No; a lance-thrust in the head, now healing," replied the mujik. "After a few days' rest, little father, thou wilt be able to proceed. Thou didst fall into the river; but the Tartars neither touched nor searched thee; and thy purse is still in thy pocket."

Michael Strogoff gripped the mujik's hand. Then, recovering himself with a sudden effort, "Friend," said he, "how long have I been in thy hut?"

"Three days."

"Three days lost!"

"Three days hast thou lain unconscious."

"Hast thou a horse to sell me?"

"Thou wishest to go?"

"At once."

"I have neither horse nor carriage, little father. Where the Tartar has passed there remains nothing!"

"Well, I will go on foot to Omsk to find a horse."

"A few more hours of rest, and thou wilt be in a better condition to pursue thy journey."

"Not an hour!"

"Come now," replied the mujik, recognizing the fact that it was useless to struggle against the will of his guest, "I will guide thee myself. Besides," he added, "the Russians are still in great force at Omsk, and thou couldst, perhaps, pass unperceived."

"Friend," replied Michael Strogoff, "Heaven reward thee for all thou hast done for me!"

"Only fools expect reward on earth," replied the mujik.

Michael Strogoff went out of the hut. When he tried to walk he was seized with such faintness that, without the assistance of the mujik, he would have fallen; but the fresh air quickly revived him. He then felt the wound in his head, the violence of which his fur cap had lessened. With the energy which he possessed, he was not a man to succumb under such a trifle. Before his eyes lay a single goal--far-distant Irkutsk. He must reach it! But he must pass through Omsk without stopping there.

"God protect my mother and Nadia!" he murmured. "I have no longer the right to think of them!"

Michael Strogoff and the mujik soon arrived in the mercantile quarter of the lower town. The surrounding earthwork had been destroyed in many places, and there were the breaches through which the marauders who followed the armies of Feofar-Khan had penetrated. Within Omsk, in its streets and squares, the Tartar soldiers swarmed like ants; but it was

easy to see that a hand of iron imposed upon them a discipline to which they were little accustomed. They walked nowhere alone, but in armed groups, to defend themselves against surprise.

In the chief square, transformed into a camp, guarded by many sentries, 2,000 Tartars bivouacked. The horses, picketed but still saddled, were ready to start at the first order. Omsk could only be a temporary halting-place for this Tartar cavalry, which preferred the rich plains of Eastern Siberia, where the towns were more wealthy, and, consequently, pillage more profitable.

Above the mercantile town rose the upper quarter, which Ivan Ogareff, notwithstanding several assaults vigorously made but bravely repelled, had not yet been able to reduce. Upon its embattled walls floated the national colors of Russia.

It was not without a legitimate pride that Michael Strogoff and his guide, vowing fidelity, saluted them.

Michael Strogoff was perfectly acquainted with the town of Omsk, and he took care to avoid those streets which were much frequented. This was not from any fear of being recognized. In the town his old mother only could have called him by name, but he had sworn not to see her, and he did not. Besides--and he wished it with his whole heart--she might have fled into some quiet portion of the steppe.

The mujik very fortunately knew a postmaster who, if well paid, would not refuse at his request either to let or to sell a carriage or horses. There remained the difficulty of leaving the town, but the breaches in the fortifications would, of course, facilitate his departure.

The mujik was accordingly conducting his guest straight to the posting-house, when, in a narrow street, Michael Strogoff, coming to a sudden stop sprang behind a jutting wall.

"What is the matter?" asked the astonished mujik.

"Silence!" replied Michael, with his finger on his lips. At this moment a detachment debouched from the principal square into the street which Michael Strogoff and his companion had just been following.

At the head of the detachment, composed of twenty horsemen, was an officer dressed in a very simple uniform. Although he glanced rapidly from one side to the other he could not have seen Michael Strogoff, owing to his precipitous retreat.

The detachment went at full trot into the narrow street. Neither the officer nor his escort concerned themselves about the inhabitants. Several unlucky ones had scarcely time to make way for their passage. There were a few half-stifled cries, to which thrusts of the lance gave an instant reply, and the street was immediately cleared.

When the escort had disappeared, "Who is that officer?" asked Michael Strogoff. And while putting the question his face was pale as that of a corpse.

"It is Ivan Ogareff," replied the Siberian, in a deep voice which breathed hatred.

"He!" cried Michael Strogoff, from whom the word escaped with a fury he could not conquer. He had just recognized in this officer the traveler who had struck him at the posting-house of Ichim. And, although he had only caught a glimpse of him, it burst upon his mind, at the same time, that this traveler was the old Zingari whose words he had overheard in the market place of Nijni-Novgorod.

Michael Strogoff was not mistaken. The two men were one and the same. It was under the garb of a Zingari, mingling with the band of Sangarre, that Ivan Ogareff had been able to leave the town of Nijni-Novgorod, where he had gone to seek his confidants. Sangarre and her Zingari, well paid spies, were absolutely devoted to him. It was he who, during the night, on the fair-ground had uttered that singular sentence, which Michael Strogoff could not understand; it was he who was voyaging on board the Caucasus, with the whole of the Bohemian band; it was he who, by this other route, from Kasan to Ichim, across the Urals, had reached Omsk, where now he held supreme authority.

Ivan Ogareff had been barely three days at Omsk, and had it not been for

their fatal meeting at Ichim, and for the event which had detained him three days on the banks of the Irtych, Michael Strogoff would have evidently beaten him on the way to Irkutsk.

And who knows how many misfortunes would have been avoided in the future! In any case--and now more than ever--Michael Strogoff must avoid Ivan Ogareff, and contrive not to be seen. When the moment of encountering him face to face should arrive, he knew how to meet it, even should the traitor be master of the whole of Siberia.

The mujik and Michael resumed their way and arrived at the posting-house. To leave Omsk by one of the breaches would not be difficult after nightfall. As for purchasing a carriage to replace the tarantass, that was impossible. There were none to be let or sold. But what want had Michael Strogoff now for a carriage? Was he not alone, alas? A horse would suffice him; and, very fortunately, a horse could be had. It was an animal of strength and mettle, and Michael Strogoff, accomplished horseman as he was, could make good use of it.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon. Michael Strogoff, compelled to wait till nightfall, in order to pass the fortifications, but not desiring to show himself, remained in the posting-house, and there partook of food.

There was a great crowd in the public room. They were talking of the expected arrival of a corps of Muscovite troops, not at Omsk, but at

Tomsk--a corps intended to recapture that town from the Tartars of Feofar-Khan.

Michael Strogoff lent an attentive ear, but took no part in the conversation. Suddenly a cry made him tremble, a cry which penetrated to the depths of his soul, and these two words rushed into his ear: "My son!"

His mother, the old woman Marfa, was before him! Trembling, she smiled upon him. She stretched forth her arms to him. Michael Strogoff arose. He was about to throw himself--

The thought of duty, the serious danger for his mother and himself in this unfortunate meeting, suddenly stopped him, and such was his command over himself that not a muscle of his face moved. There were twenty people in the public room. Among them were, perhaps, spies, and was it not known in the town that the son of Marfa Strogoff belonged to the corps of the couriers of the Czar?

Michael Strogoff did not move.

"Michael!" cried his mother.

"Who are you, my good lady?" Michael Strogoff stammered, unable to speak in his usual firm tone.

"Who am I, thou askest! Dost thou no longer know thy mother?"

"You are mistaken," coldly replied Michael Strogoff. "A resemblance deceives you."

The old Marfa went up to him, and, looking straight into his eyes, said, "Thou art not the son of Peter and Marfa Strogoff?"

Michael Strogoff would have given his life to have locked his mother in his arms; but if he yielded it was all over with him, with her, with his mission, with his oath! Completely master of himself, he closed his eyes, in order not to see the inexpressible anguish which agitated the revered countenance of his mother. He drew back his hands, in order not to touch those trembling hands which sought him. "I do not know in truth what it is you say, my good woman," he replied, stepping back.

"Michael!" again cried his aged mother.

"My name is not Michael. I never was your son! I am Nicholas Korpanoff, a merchant at Irkutsk."

And suddenly he left the public room, whilst for the last time the words re-echoed, "My son! my son!"

Michael Strogoff, by a desperate effort, had gone. He did not see his old mother, who had fallen back almost inanimate upon a bench. But when

the postmaster hastened to assist her, the aged woman raised herself. Suddenly a thought occurred to her. She denied by her son! It was not possible. As for being herself deceived, and taking another for him, equally impossible. It was certainly her son whom she had just seen; and if he had not recognized her it was because he would not, it was because he ought not, it was because he had some cogent reasons for acting thus! And then, her mother's feelings arising within her, she had only one thought--"Can I, unwittingly, have ruined him?"

"I am mad," she said to her interrogators. "My eyes have deceived me! This young man is not my child. He had not his voice. Let us think no more of it; if we do I shall end by finding him everywhere."

Less than ten minutes afterwards a Tartar officer appeared in the posting-house. "Marfa Strogoff?" he asked.

"It is I," replied the old woman, in a tone so calm, and with a face so tranquil, that those who had witnessed the meeting with her son would not have known her.

"Come," said the officer.

Marfa Strogoff, with firm step, followed the Tartar. Some moments afterwards she found herself in the chief square in the presence of Ivan Ogareff, to whom all the details of this scene had been immediately reported.

Ogareff, suspecting the truth, interrogated the old Siberian woman. "Thy name?" he asked in a rough voice.

"Marfa Strogoff."

"Thou hast a son?"

"Yes."

"He is a courier of the Czar?"

"Yes."

"Where is he?"

"At Moscow."

"Thou hast no news of him?"

"No news."

"Since how long?"

"Since two months."

"Who, then, was that young man whom thou didst call thy son a few moments ago at the posting-house?"

"A young Siberian whom I took for him," replied Marfa Strogoff. "This is the tenth man in whom I have thought I recognized my son since the town has been so full of strangers. I think I see him everywhere."

"So this young man was not Michael Strogoff?"

"It was not Michael Strogoff."

"Dost thou know, old woman, that I can torture thee until thou avowest the truth?"

"I have spoken the truth, and torture will not cause me to alter my words in any way."

"This Siberian was not Michael Strogoff?" asked a second time Ivan Ogareff.

"No, it was not he," replied a second time Marfa Strogoff. "Do you think that for anything in the world I would deny a son whom God has given me?"

Ivan Ogareff regarded with an evil eye the old woman who braved him to the face. He did not doubt but that she had recognized her son in this

young Siberian. Now if this son had first renounced his mother, and if his mother renounced him in her turn, it could occur only from the most weighty motive. Ogareff had therefore no doubt that the pretended Nicholas Korpanoff was Michael Strogoff, courier of the Czar, seeking concealment under a false name, and charged with some mission which it would have been important for him to know. He therefore at once gave orders for his pursuit. Then "Let this woman be conducted to Tomsk," he said.

While the soldiers brutally dragged her off, he added between his teeth, "When the moment arrives I shall know how to make her speak, this old sorceress!"

CHAPTER XV THE MARSHES OF THE BARABA

IT was fortunate that Michael Strogoff had left the posting-house so promptly. The orders of Ivan Ogareff had been immediately transmitted to all the approaches of the city, and a full description of Michael sent to all the various commandants, in order to prevent his departure from Omsk. But he had already passed through one of the breaches in the wall; his horse was galloping over the steppe, and the chances of escape were in his favor.

It was on the 29th of July, at eight o'clock in the evening, that Michael Strogoff had left Omsk. This town is situated about halfway between Moscow and Irkutsk, where it was necessary that he should arrive within ten days if he wished to get ahead of the Tartar columns. It was evident that the unlucky chance which had brought him into the presence of his mother had betrayed his incognito. Ivan Ogareff was no longer ignorant of the fact that a courier of the Czar had just passed Omsk, taking the direction of Irkutsk. The dispatches which this courier bore must have been of immense importance. Michael Strogoff knew, therefore, that every effort would be made to capture him.

But what he did not know, and could not know, was that Marfa Strogoff was in the hands of Ivan Ogareff, and that she was about to atone, perhaps with her life, for that natural exhibition of her feelings which she had been unable to restrain when she suddenly found herself in the presence of her son. And it was fortunate that he was ignorant of it.

Could he have withstood this fresh trial?

Michael Strogoff urged on his horse, imbuing him with all his own feverish impatience, requiring of him one thing only, namely, to bear him rapidly to the next posting-house, where he could be exchanged for a quicker conveyance.

At midnight he had cleared fifty miles, and halted at the station of Koulikovo. But there, as he had feared, he found neither horses nor carriages. Several Tartar detachments had passed along the highway of the steppe. Everything had been stolen or requisitioned both in the villages and in the posting-houses. It was with difficulty that Michael Strogoff was even able to obtain some refreshment for his horse and himself.

It was of great importance, therefore, to spare his horse, for he could not tell when or how he might be able to replace it. Desiring, however, to put the greatest possible distance between himself and the horsemen who had no doubt been dispatched in pursuit, he resolved to push on. After one hour's rest he resumed his course across the steppe.

Hitherto the weather had been propitious for his journey. The temperature was endurable. The nights at this time of the year are very short, and as they are lighted by the moon, the route over the steppe is practicable. Michael Strogoff, moreover, was a man certain of his road and devoid of doubt or hesitation, and in spite of the melancholy

thoughts which possessed him he had preserved his clearness of mind, and made for his destined point as though it were visible upon the horizon. When he did halt for a moment at some turn in the road it was to breathe his horse. Now he would dismount to ease his steed for a moment, and again he would place his ear to the ground to listen for the sound of galloping horses upon the steppe. Nothing arousing his suspicions, he resumed his way.

On the 30th of July, at nine o'clock in the morning, Michael Strogoff passed through the station of Touroumoff and entered the swampy district of the Baraba.

There, for a distance of three hundred versts, the natural obstacles would be extremely great. He knew this, but he also knew that he would certainly surmount them.

These vast marshes of the Baraba, form the reservoir to all the rain-water which finds no outlet either towards the Obi or towards the Irtych. The soil of this vast depression is entirely argillaceous, and therefore impermeable, so that the waters remain there and make of it a region very difficult to cross during the hot season. There, however, lies the way to Irkutsk, and it is in the midst of ponds, pools, lakes, and swamps, from which the sun draws poisonous exhalations, that the road winds, and entails upon the traveler the greatest fatigue and danger.

Michael Strogoff spurred his horse into the midst of a grassy prairie, differing greatly from the close-cropped sod of the steppe, where feed the immense Siberian herds. The grass here was five or six feet in height, and had made room for swamp-plants, to which the dampness of the place, assisted by the heat of summer, had given giant proportions. These were principally canes and rushes, which formed a tangled network, an impenetrable undergrowth, sprinkled everywhere with a thousand flowers remarkable for the brightness of their color.

Michael Strogoff, galloping amongst this undergrowth of cane, was no longer visible from the swamps which bordered the road. The tall grass rose above him, and his track was indicated only by the flight of innumerable aquatic birds, which rose from the side of the road and dispersed into the air in screaming flocks.

The way, however, was clearly traceable. Now it would lie straight between the dense thicket of marsh-plants; again it would follow the winding shores of vast pools, some of which, several versts in length and breadth, deserve the name of lakes. In other localities the stagnant waters through which the road lay had been avoided, not by bridges, but by tottering platforms ballasted with thick layers of clay, whose joists shook like a too weak plank thrown across an abyss. Some of these platforms extended over three hundred feet, and travelers by tarantass, when crossing them have experienced a nausea like sea-sickness.

Michael Strogoff, whether the soil beneath his feet was solid or whether

it sank under him, galloped on without halt, leaping the space between the rotten joists; but however fast they traveled the horse and the horseman were unable to escape from the sting of the two-winged insects which infest this marshy country.

Travelers who are obliged to cross the Baraba during the summer take care to provide themselves with masks of horse-hair, to which is attached a coat of mail of very fine wire, which covers their shoulders. Notwithstanding these precautions, there are few who come out of these marshes without having their faces, necks, and hands covered with red spots. The atmosphere there seems to bristle with fine needles, and one would almost say that a knight's armor would not protect him against the darts of these dipterals. It is a dreary region, which man dearly disputes with tipulae, gnats, mosquitos, horse-flies, and millions of microscopic insects which are not visible to the naked eye; but, although they are not seen, they make themselves felt by their intolerable stinging, to which the most callous Siberian hunters have never been able to inure themselves.

Michael Strogoff's horse, stung by these venomous insects, sprang forward as if the rowels of a thousand spurs had pierced his flanks. Mad with rage, he tore along over verst after verst with the speed of an express train, lashing his sides with his tail, seeking by the rapidity of his pace an alleviation of his torture.

It required as good a horseman as Michael Strogoff not to be thrown by

the plungings of his horse, and the sudden stops and bounds which he made to escape from the stings of his persecutors. Having become insensible, so to speak, to physical suffering, possessed only with the one desire to arrive at his destination at whatever cost, he saw during this mad race only one thing--that the road flew rapidly behind him.

Who would have thought that this district of the Baraba, so unhealthy during the summer, could have afforded an asylum for human beings? Yet it did so. Several Siberian hamlets appeared from time to time among the giant canes. Men, women, children, and old men, clad in the skins of beasts, their faces covered with hardened blisters of skin, pastured their poor herds of sheep. In order to preserve the animals from the attack of the insects, they drove them to the leeward of fires of green wood, which were kept burning night and day, and the pungent smoke of which floated over the vast swamp.

When Michael Strogoff perceived that his horse, tired out, was on the point of succumbing, he halted at one of these wretched hamlets, and there, forgetting his own fatigue, he himself rubbed the wounds of the poor animal with hot grease according to the Siberian custom; then he gave him a good feed; and it was only after he had well groomed and provided for him that he thought of himself, and recruited his strength by a hasty meal of bread and meat and a glass of kwass. One hour afterwards, or at the most two, he resumed with all speed the interminable road to Irkutsk.

On the 30th of July, at four o'clock in the afternoon, Michael Strogoff, insensible of every fatigue, arrived at Elamsk. There it became necessary to give a night's rest to his horse. The brave animal could no longer have continued the journey. At Elamsk, as indeed elsewhere, there existed no means of transport,--for the same reasons as at the previous villages, neither carriages nor horses were to be had.

Michael Strogoff resigned himself therefore to pass the night at Elamsk, to give his horse twelve hours' rest. He recalled the instructions which had been given to him at Moscow--to cross Siberia incognito, to arrive at Irkutsk, but not to sacrifice success to the rapidity of the journey; and consequently it was necessary that he should husband the sole means of transport which remained to him.

On the morrow, Michael Strogoff left Elamsk at the moment when the first Tartar scouts were signaled ten versts behind upon the road to the Baraba, and he plunged again into the swampy region. The road was level, which made it easy, but very tortuous, and therefore long. It was impossible, moreover, to leave it, and to strike a straight line across that impassable network of pools and bogs.

On the next day, the 1st of August, eighty miles farther, Michael Strogoff arrived at midday at the town of Spaskoe, and at two o'clock he halted at Pokrowskoe. His horse, jaded since his departure from Elamsk, could not have taken a single step more.

There Michael Strogoff was again compelled to lose, for necessary rest, the end of that day and the entire night; but starting again on the following morning, and still traversing the semi-inundated soil, on the 2nd of August, at four o'clock in the afternoon, after a stage of fifty miles he reached Kamsk.

The country had changed. This little village of Kamsk lies, like an island, habitable and healthy, in the midst of the uninhabitable district. It is situated in the very center of the Baraba. The emigration caused by the Tartar invasion had not yet depopulated this little town of Kamsk. Its inhabitants probably fancied themselves safe in the center of the Baraba, whence at least they thought they would have time to flee if they were directly menaced.

Michael Strogoff, although exceedingly anxious for news, could ascertain nothing at this place. It would have been rather to him that the Governor would have addressed himself had he known who the pretended merchant of Irkutsk really was. Kamsk, in fact, by its very situation seemed to be outside the Siberian world and the grave events which troubled it.

Besides, Michael Strogoff showed himself little, if at all. To be unperceived was not now enough for him: he would have wished to be invisible. The experience of the past made him more and more circumspect in the present and the future. Therefore he secluded himself, and not caring to traverse the streets of the village, he would not even leave

the inn at which he had halted.

As for his horse, he did not even think of exchanging him for another animal. He had become accustomed to this brave creature. He knew to what extent he could rely upon him. In buying him at Omsk he had been lucky, and in taking him to the postmaster the generous mujik had rendered him a great service. Besides, if Michael Strogoff had already become attached to his horse, the horse himself seemed to become inured, by degrees, to the fatigue of such a journey, and provided that he got several hours of repose daily, his rider might hope that he would carry him beyond the invaded provinces.

So, during the evening and night of the 2nd of August, Michael Strogoff remained confined to his inn, at the entrance of the town; which was little frequented and out of the way of the importunate and curious.

Exhausted with fatigue, he went to bed after having seen that his horse lacked nothing; but his sleep was broken. What he had seen since his departure from Moscow showed him the importance of his mission. The rising was an extremely serious one, and the treachery of Ogareff made it still more formidable. And when his eyes fell upon the letter bearing upon it the authority of the imperial seal--the letter which, no doubt, contained the remedy for so many evils, the safety of all this war-ravaged country--Michael Strogoff felt within himself a fierce desire to dash on across the steppe, to accomplish the distance which separated him from Irkutsk as the crow would fly it, to be an eagle that

he might overtop all obstacles, to be a hurricane that he might sweep through the air at a hundred versts an hour, and to be at last face to face with the Grand Duke, and to exclaim: "Your highness, from his Majesty the Czar!"

On the next morning at six o'clock, Michael Strogoff started off again. Thanks to his extreme prudence this part of the journey was signalized by no incident whatever. At Oubinsk he gave his horse a whole night's rest, for he wished on the next day to accomplish the hundred versts which lie between Oubinsk and Ikoulskoe without halting. He started therefore at dawn; but unfortunately the Baraba proved more detestable than ever.

In fact, between Oubinsk and Kamakore the very heavy rains of some previous weeks were retained by this shallow depression as in a water-tight bowl. There was, for a long distance, no break in the succession of swamps, pools, and lakes. One of these lakes--large enough to warrant its geographical nomenclature--Tchang, Chinese in name, had to be coasted for more than twenty versts, and this with the greatest difficulty. Hence certain delays occurred, which all the impatience of Michael Strogoff could not avoid. He had been well advised in not taking a carriage at Kamsk, for his horse passed places which would have been impracticable for a conveyance on wheels.

In the evening, at nine o'clock, Michael Strogoff arrived at Ikoulskoe, and halted there over night. In this remote village of the Baraba news

of the war was utterly wanting. From its situation, this part of the province, lying in the fork formed by the two Tartar columns which had bifurcated, one upon Omsk and the other upon Tomsk, had hitherto escaped the horrors of the invasion.

But the natural obstacles were now about to disappear, for, if he experienced no delay, Michael Strogoff should on the morrow be free of the Baraba and arrive at Kolyvan. There he would be within eighty miles of Tomsk. He would then be guided by circumstances, and very probably he would decide to go around Tomsk, which, if the news were true, was occupied by Feofar-Khan.

But if the small towns of Ikoulskoe and Karguinsk, which he passed on the next day, were comparatively quiet, owing to their position in the Baraba, was it not to be dreaded that, upon the right banks of the Obi, Michael Strogoff would have much more to fear from man? It was probable. However, should it become necessary, he would not hesitate to abandon the beaten path to Irkutsk. To journey then across the steppe he would, no doubt, run the risk of finding himself without supplies. There would be, in fact, no longer a well-marked road. Still, there must be no hesitation.

Finally, towards half past three in the afternoon, Michael Strogoff left the last depressions of the Baraba, and the dry and hard soil of Siberia rang out once more beneath his horse's hoofs.

He had left Moscow on the 15th of July. Therefore on this day, the 5th of August, including more than seventy hours lost on the banks of the Irtych, twenty days had gone by since his departure.

One thousand miles still separated him from Irkutsk.

CHAPTER XVI A FINAL EFFORT

MICHAEL'S fear of meeting the Tartars in the plains beyond the Baraba was by no means ungrounded. The fields, trodden down by horses' hoofs, afforded but too clear evidence that their hordes had passed that way; the same, indeed, might be said of these barbarians as of the Turks: "Where the Turk goes, no grass grows."

Michael saw at once that in traversing this country the greatest caution was necessary. Wreaths of smoke curling upwards on the horizon showed that huts and hamlets were still burning. Had these been fired by the advance guard, or had the Emir's army already advanced beyond the boundaries of the province? Was Feofar-Khan himself in the government of Yeniseisk? Michael could settle on no line of action until these questions were answered. Was the country so deserted that he could not discover a single Siberian to enlighten him?

Michael rode on for two versts without meeting a human being. He looked carefully for some house which had not been deserted. Every one was tenantless.

One hut, however, which he could just see between the trees, was still smoking. As he approached he perceived, at some yards from the ruins of the building, an old man surrounded by weeping children. A woman still young, evidently his daughter and the mother of the poor children, kneeling on the ground, was gazing on the scene of desolation. She had

at her breast a baby but a few months old; shortly she would have not even that nourishment to give it. Ruin and desolation were all around!

Michael approached the old man.

"Will you answer me a few questions?" he asked.

"Speak," replied the old man.

"Have the Tartars passed this way?"

"Yes, for my house is in flames."

"Was it an army or a detachment?"

"An army, for, as far as eye can reach, our fields are laid waste."

"Commanded by the Emir?"

"By the Emir; for the Obi's waters are red."

"Has Feofar-Khan entered Tomsk?"

"He has."

"Do you know if his men have entered Kolyvan?"

"No; for Kolyvan does not yet burn."

"Thanks, friend. Can I aid you and yours?"

"No."

"Good-by."

"Farewell."

And Michael, having presented five and twenty roubles to the unfortunate woman, who had not even strength to thank him, put spurs to his horse once more.

One thing he knew; he must not pass through Tomsk. To go to Kolyvan, which the Tartars had not yet reached, was possible. Yes, that is what he must do; there he must prepare himself for another long stage. There was nothing for it but, having crossed the Obi, to take the Irkutsk road and avoid Tomsk.

This new route decided on, Michael must not delay an instant. Nor did he, but, putting his horse into a steady gallop, he took the road towards the left bank of the Obi, which was still forty versts distant. Would there be a ferry boat there, or should he, finding that the Tartars had destroyed all the boats, be obliged to swim across?

As to his horse, it was by this time pretty well worn out, and Michael intended to make it perform this stage only, and then to exchange it for a fresh one at Kolyvan. Kolyvan would be like a fresh starting point, for on leaving that town his journey would take a new form. So long as he traversed a devastated country the difficulties must be very great; but if, having avoided Tomsk, he could resume the road to Irkutsk across the province of Yeniseisk, which was not yet laid waste, he would finish his journey in a few days.

Night came on, bringing with it refreshing coolness after the heat of the day. At midnight the steppe was profoundly dark. The sound of the horses's hoofs alone was heard on the road, except when, every now and then, its master spoke a few encouraging words. In such darkness as this great care was necessary lest he should leave the road, bordered by pools and streams, tributaries of the Obi. Michael therefore advanced as quickly as was consistent with safety. He trusted no less to the excellence of his eyes, which penetrated the gloom, than to the well-proved sagacity of his horse.

Just as Michael dismounted to discover the exact direction of the road, he heard a confused murmuring sound from the west. It was like the noise of horses' hoofs at some distance on the parched ground. Michael listened attentively, putting his ear to the ground.

"It is a detachment of cavalry coming by the road from Omsk," he said to

himself. "They are marching very quickly, for the noise is increasing. Are they Russians or Tartars?"

Michael again listened. "Yes," said he, "they are at a sharp trot. My horse cannot outstrip them. If they are Russians I will join them; if Tartars I must avoid them. But how? Where can I hide in this steppe?"

He gave a look around, and, through the darkness, discovered a confused mass at a hundred paces before him on the left of the road. "There is a copse!" he exclaimed. "To take refuge there is to run the risk of being caught, if they are in search of me; but I have no choice."

In a few moments Michael, dragging his horse by the bridle, reached a little larch wood, through which the road lay. Beyond this it was destitute of trees, and wound among bogs and pools, separated by dwarfed bushes, whins, and heather. The ground on either side was quite impracticable, and the detachment must necessarily pass through the wood. They were pursuing the high road to Irkutsk. Plunging in about forty feet, he was stopped by a stream running under the brushwood. But the shadow was so deep that Michael ran no risk of being seen, unless the wood should be carefully searched. He therefore led his horse to the stream and fastened him to a tree, returning to the edge of the road to listen and ascertain with what sort of people he had to do.

Michael had scarcely taken up his position behind a group of larches when a confused light appeared, above which glared brighter lights

waving about in the shadow.

"Torches!" said he to himself. And he drew quickly back, gliding like a savage into the thickest underwood.

As they approached the wood the horses' pace was slackened. The horsemen were probably lighting up the road with the intention of examining every turn.

Michael feared this, and instinctively drew near to the bank of the stream, ready to plunge in if necessary.

Arrived at the top of the wood, the detachment halted. The horsemen dismounted. There were about fifty. A dozen of them carried torches, lighting up the road.

By watching their preparations Michael found to his joy that the detachment were not thinking of visiting the copse, but only bivouacking near, to rest their horses and allow the men to take some refreshment. The horses were soon unsaddled, and began to graze on the thick grass which carpeted the ground. The men meantime stretched themselves by the side of the road, and partook of the provisions they produced from their knapsacks.

Michael's self-possession had never deserted him, and creeping amongst the high grass he endeavored not only to examine the new-comers, but to

hear what they said. It was a detachment from Omsk, composed of Usbeck horsemen, a race of the Mongolian type. These men, well built, above the medium height, rough, and wild-featured, wore on their heads the "talpak," or black sheep-skin cap, and on their feet yellow high-heeled boots with turned-up toes, like the shoes of the Middle Ages. Their tunics were close-fitting, and confined at the waist by a leathern belt braided with red. They were armed defensively with a shield, and offensively with a curved sword, and a flintlock musket slung at the saddle-bow. From their shoulders hung gay-colored cloaks.

The horses, which were feeding at liberty at the edge of the wood, were, like their masters, of the Usbeck race. These animals are rather smaller than the Turcomanian horses, but are possessed of remarkable strength, and know no other pace than the gallop.

This detachment was commanded by a "pendja-baschi"; that is to say, a commander of fifty men, having under him a "deh-baschi," or simple commander of ten men. These two officers wore helmets and half coats-of-mail; little trumpets fastened to their saddle-bows were the distinctive signs of their rank.

The pendja-baschi had been obliged to let his men rest, fatigued with a long stage. He and the second officer, smoking "beng," the leaf which forms the base of the "has-chisch," strolled up and down the wood, so that Michael Strogoff without being seen, could catch and understand their conversation, which was spoken in the Tartar language.

Michael's attention was singularly excited by their very first words. It was of him they were speaking.

"This courier cannot be much in advance of us," said the pendja-baschi; "and, on the other hand, it is absolutely impossible that he can have followed any other route than that of the Baraba."

"Who knows if he has left Omsk?" replied the deh-baschi. "Perhaps he is still hidden in the town."

"That is to be wished, certainly. Colonel Ogareff would have no fear then that the dispatches he bears should ever reach their destination."

"They say that he is a native, a Siberian," resumed the deh-baschi. "If so, he must be well acquainted with the country, and it is possible that he has left the Irkutsk road, depending on rejoining it later."

"But then we should be in advance of him," answered the pendja-baschi; "for we left Omsk within an hour after his departure, and have since followed the shortest road with all the speed of our horses. He has either remained in Omsk, or we shall arrive at Tomsk before him, so as to cut him off; in either case he will not reach Irkutsk."

"A rugged woman, that old Siberian, who is evidently his mother," said the deh-baschi.

At this remark Michael's heart beat violently.

"Yes," answered the pendja-baschi. "She stuck to it well that the pretended merchant was not her son, but it was too late. Colonel Ogareff was not to be taken in; and, as he said, he will know how to make the old witch speak when the time comes."

These words were so many dagger-thrusts for Michael. He was known to be a courier of the Czar! A detachment of horsemen on his track could not fail to cut him off. And, worst of all, his mother was in the hands of the Tartars, and the cruel Ogareff had undertaken to make her speak when he wished!

Michael well knew that the brave Siberian would sacrifice her life for him. He had fancied that he could not hate Ivan Ogareff more, yet a fresh tide of hate now rose in his heart. The wretch who had betrayed his country now threatened to torture his mother.

The conversation between the two officers continued, and Michael understood that an engagement was imminent in the neighborhood of Kolyvan, between the Muscovite troops coming from the north and the Tartars. A small Russian force of two thousand men, reported to have reached the lower course of the Obi, were advancing by forced marches towards Tomsk. If such was the case, this force, which would soon find itself engaged with the main body of Feofar-Khan's army, would

be inevitably overwhelmed, and the Irkutsk road would be in the entire possession of the invaders.

As to himself, Michael learnt, by some words from the pendja-baschi, that a price was set on his head, and that orders had been given to take him, dead or alive.

It was necessary, therefore, to get the start of the Usbeck horsemen on the Irkutsk road, and put the Obi between himself and them. But to do that, he must escape before the camp was broken up.

His determination taken, Michael prepared to execute it.

Indeed, the halt would not be prolonged, and the pendja-baschi did not intend to give his men more than an hour's rest, although their horses could not have been changed for fresh ones since Omsk, and must be as much fatigued as that of Michael Strogoff.

There was not a moment to lose. It was within an hour of morning. It was needful to profit by the darkness to leave the little wood and dash along the road; but although night favored it the success of such a flight appeared to be almost impossible.

Not wishing to do anything at random, Michael took time for reflection, carefully weighing the chances so as to take the best. From the situation of the place the result was this--that he could not escape

through the back of the wood, the stream which bordered it being not only deep, but very wide and muddy. Beneath this thick water was a slimy bog, on which the foot could not rest. There was only one way open, the high-road. To endeavor to reach it by creeping round the edge of the wood, without attracting attention, and then to gallop at headlong speed, required all the remaining strength and energy of his noble steed. Too probably it would fall dead on reaching the banks of the Obi, when, either by boat or by swimming, he must cross this important river. This was what Michael had before him.

His energy and courage increased in sight of danger.

His life, his mission, his country, perhaps the safety of his mother, were at stake. He could not hesitate.

There was not a moment to be lost. Already there was a slight movement among the men of the detachment. A few horsemen were strolling up and down the road in front of the wood. The rest were still lying at the foot of the trees, but their horses were gradually penetrating towards the center of the wood.

Michael had at first thought of seizing one of these horses, but he recollected that, of course, they would be as fatigued as his own. It was better to trust to his own brave steed, which had already rendered him such important service. The good animal, hidden behind a thicket, had escaped the sight of the Usbecks. They, besides, had not penetrated

so far into the wood.

Michael crawled up to his horse through the grass, and found him lying down. He patted and spoke gently to him, and managed to raise him without noise. Fortunately, the torches were entirely consumed, and now went out, the darkness being still profound under shelter of the larches. After replacing the bit, Michael looked to his girths and stirrups, and began to lead his horse quietly away. The intelligent animal followed his master without even making the least neigh.

A few Usbeck horses raised their heads, and began to wander towards the edge of the wood. Michael held his revolver in his hand, ready to blow out the brains of the first Tartar who should approach him. But happily the alarm was not given, and he was able to gain the angle made by the wood where it joined the road.

To avoid being seen, Michael's intention was not to mount until after turning a corner some two hundred feet from the wood. Unfortunately, just at the moment that he was issuing from the wood, an Usbeck's horse, scenting him, neighed and began to trot along the road. His master ran to catch him, and seeing a shadowy form moving in the dim light, "Look out!" he shouted.

At the cry, all the men of the bivouac jumped up, and ran to seize their horses. Michael leaped on his steed, and galloped away. The two officers of the detachment urged on their men to follow.

Michael heard a report, and felt a ball pass through his tunic. Without turning his head, without replying, he spurred on, and, clearing the brushwood with a tremendous bound, he galloped at full speed toward the Obi.

The Usbecks' horses being unsaddled gave him a small start, but in less than two minutes he heard the tramp of several horses gradually gaining on him.

Day was now beginning to break, and objects at some distance were becoming visible. Michael turned his head, and perceived a horseman rapidly approaching him. It was the deh-baschi. Being better mounted, this officer had distanced his detachment.

Without drawing rein, Michael extended his revolver, and took a moment's aim. The Usbeck officer, hit in the breast, rolled on the ground.

But the other horsemen followed him closely, and without waiting to assist the deh-baschi, exciting each other by their shouts, digging their spurs into their horses' sides, they gradually diminished the distance between themselves and Michael.

For half an hour only was the latter able to keep out of range of the Tartars, but he well knew that his horse was becoming weaker, and dreaded every instant that he would stumble never to rise again.

It was now light, although the sun had not yet risen above the horizon. Two versts distant could be seen a pale line bordered by a few trees.

This was the Obi, which flows from the southwest to the northeast, the surface almost level with the ground, its bed being but the steppe itself.

Several times shots were fired at Michael, but without hitting him, and several times too he discharged his revolver on those of the soldiers who pressed him too closely. Each time an Usbeck rolled on the ground, midst cries of rage from his companions. But this pursuit could only terminate to Michael's disadvantage. His horse was almost exhausted. He managed to reach the bank of the river. The Usbeck detachment was now not more than fifty paces behind him.

The Obi was deserted--not a boat of any description which could take him over the water!

"Courage, my brave horse!" cried Michael. "Come! A last effort!" And he plunged into the river, which here was half a verst in width.

It would have been difficult to stand against the current--indeed, Michael's horse could get no footing. He must therefore swim across the river, although it was rapid as a torrent. Even to attempt it showed Michael's marvelous courage. The soldiers reached the bank, but

hesitated to plunge in.

The pendja-baschi seized his musket and took aim at Michael, whom he could see in the middle of the stream. The shot was fired, and Michael's horse, struck in the side, was borne away by the current.

His master, speedily disentangling himself from his stirrups, struck out boldly for the shore. In the midst of a hailstorm of balls he managed to reach the opposite side, and disappeared in the rushes.

CHAPTER XVII THE RIVALS

MICHAEL was in comparative safety, though his situation was still terrible. Now that the faithful animal who had so bravely borne him had met his death in the waters of the river, how was he to continue his journey?

He was on foot, without provisions, in a country devastated by the invasion, overrun by the Emir's scouts, and still at a considerable distance from the place he was striving to reach. "By Heaven, I will get there!" he exclaimed, in reply to all the reasons for faltering. "God will protect our sacred Russia."

Michael was out of reach of the Usbeck horsemen. They had not dared to pursue him through the river.

Once more on solid ground Michael stopped to consider what he should do next. He wished to avoid Tomsk, now occupied by the Tartar troops. Nevertheless, he must reach some town, or at least a post-house, where he could procure a horse. A horse once found, he would throw himself out of the beaten track, and not again take to the Irkutsk road until in the neighborhood of Krasnoiarsk. From that place, if he were quick, he hoped to find the way still open, and he intended to go through the Lake Baikal provinces in a southeasterly direction.

Michael began by going eastward. By following the course of the Obi two

versts further, he reached a picturesque little town lying on a small hill. A few churches, with Byzantine cupolas colored green and gold, stood up against the gray sky. This is Kolyvan, where the officers and people employed at Kamsk and other towns take refuge during the summer from the unhealthy climate of the Baraba. According to the latest news obtained by the Czar's courier, Kolyvan could not be yet in the hands of the invaders. The Tartar troops, divided into two columns, had marched to the left on Omsk, to the right on Tomsk, neglecting the intermediate country.

Michael Strogoff's plan was simply this--to reach Kolyvan before the arrival of the Usbeck horsemen, who would ascend the other bank of the Obi to the ferry. There he would procure clothes and a horse, and resume the road to Irkutsk across the southern steppe.

It was now three o'clock in the morning. The neighborhood of Kolyvan was very still, and appeared to have been totally abandoned. The country population had evidently fled to the northwards, to the province of Yeniseisk, dreading the invasion, which they could not resist.

Michael was walking at a rapid pace towards Kolyvan when distant firing struck his ear. He stopped, and clearly distinguished the dull roar of artillery, and above it a crisp rattle which could not be mistaken.

"It is cannon and musketry!" said he. "The little Russian body is engaged with the Tartar army! Pray Heaven that I may arrive at Kolyvan

before them!"

The firing became gradually louder, and soon to the left of Kolyvan a mist collected--not smoke, but those great white clouds produced by discharges of artillery.

The Usbeck horsemen stopped on the left of the Obi, to await the result of the battle. From them Michael had nothing to fear as he hastened towards the town.

In the meanwhile the firing increased, and became sensibly nearer. It was no longer a confused roar, but distinct reports. At the same time the smoke partially cleared, and it became evident that the combatants were rapidly moving southwards. It appeared that Kolyvan was to be attacked on the north side. But were the Russians defending it or the Tartars? It being impossible to decide this, Michael became greatly perplexed.

He was not more than half a verst from Kolyvan when he observed flames shooting up among the houses of the town, and the steeple of a church fell in the midst of clouds of smoke and fire. Was the struggle, then, in Kolyvan? Michael was compelled to think so. It was evident that Russians and Tartars were fighting in the streets of the town. Was this a time to seek refuge there? Would he not run a risk of being taken prisoner? Should he succeed in escaping from Kolyvan, as he had escaped from Omsk? He hesitated and stopped a moment. Would it not be better to

try, even on foot, to reach some small town, and there procure a horse at any price? This was the only thing to be done; and Michael, leaving the Obi, went forward to the right of Kolyvan.

The firing had now increased in violence. Flames soon sprang up on the left of the town. Fire was devouring one entire quarter of Kolyvan.

Michael was running across the steppe endeavoring to gain the covert of some trees when a detachment of Tartar cavalry appeared on the right. He dared not continue in that direction. The horsemen advanced rapidly, and it would have been difficult to escape them.

Suddenly, in a thick clump of trees, he saw an isolated house, which it would be possible to reach before he was perceived. Michael had no choice but to run there, hide himself and ask or take something to recruit his strength, for he was exhausted with hunger and fatigue.

He accordingly ran on towards this house, still about half a verst distant. As he approached, he could see that it was a telegraph office. Two wires left it in westerly and easterly directions, and a third went towards Kolyvan.

It was to be supposed that under the circumstances this station was abandoned; but even if it was, Michael could take refuge there, and wait till nightfall, if necessary, to again set out across the steppe covered with Tartar scouts.

He ran up to the door and pushed it open.

A single person was in the room whence the telegraphic messages were dispatched. This was a clerk, calm, phlegmatic, indifferent to all that was passing outside. Faithful to his post, he waited behind his little wicket until the public claimed his services.

Michael ran up to him, and in a voice broken by fatigue, "What do you know?" he asked.

"Nothing," answered the clerk, smiling.

"Are the Russians and Tartars engaged?"

"They say so."

"But who are the victors?"

"I don't know."

Such calmness, such indifference, in the midst of these terrible events, was scarcely credible.

"And is not the wire cut?" said Michael.

"It is cut between Kolyvan and Krasnoiarsk, but it is still working between Kolyvan and the Russian frontier."

"For the government?"

"For the government, when it thinks proper. For the public, when they pay. Ten copecks a word, whenever you like, sir!"

Michael was about to reply to this strange clerk that he had no message to send, that he only implored a little bread and water, when the door of the house was again thrown open.

Thinking that it was invaded by Tartars, Michael made ready to leap out of the window, when two men only entered the room who had nothing of the Tartar soldier about them. One of them held a dispatch, written in pencil, in his hand, and, passing the other, he hurried up to the wicket of the imperturbable clerk.

In these two men Michael recognized with astonishment, which everyone will understand, two personages of whom he was not thinking at all, and whom he had never expected to see again. They were the two reporters, Harry Blount and Alcide Jolivet, no longer traveling companions, but rivals, enemies, now that they were working on the field of battle.

They had left Ichim only a few hours after the departure of Michael Strogoff, and they had arrived at Kolyvan before him, by following the

same road, in consequence of his losing three days on the banks of the Irtych. And now, after being both present at the engagement between the Russians and Tartars before the town, they had left just as the struggle broke out in the streets, and ran to the telegraph office, so as to send off their rival dispatches to Europe, and forestall each other in their report of events.

Michael stood aside in the shadow, and without being seen himself he could see and hear all that was going on. He would now hear interesting news, and would find out whether or not he could enter Kolyvan.

Blount, having distanced his companion, took possession of the wicket, whilst Alcide Jolivet, contrary to his usual habit, stamped with impatience.

"Ten copecks a word," said the clerk.

Blount deposited a pile of roubles on the shelf, whilst his rival looked on with a sort of stupefaction.

"Good," said the clerk. And with the greatest coolness in the world he began to telegraph the following dispatch: "Daily Telegraph, London.

"From Kolyvan, Government of Omsk, Siberia, 6th August.

"Engagement between Russian and Tartar troops."

The reading was in a distinct voice, so that Michael heard all that the English correspondent was sending to his paper.

"Russians repulsed with great loss. Tartars entered Kolyvan to-day." These words ended the dispatch.

"My turn now," cried Alcide Jolivet, anxious to send off his dispatch, addressed to his cousin.

But that was not Blount's idea, who did not intend to give up the wicket, but have it in his power to send off the news just as the events occurred. He would therefore not make way for his companion.

"But you have finished!" exclaimed Jolivet.

"I have not finished," returned Harry Blount quietly.

And he proceeded to write some sentences, which he handed in to the clerk, who read out in his calm voice: "John Gilpin was a citizen of credit and renown; a train-band captain eke was he of famous London town."

Harry Blount was telegraphing some verses learned in his childhood, in order to employ the time, and not give up his place to his rival. It would perhaps cost his paper some thousands of roubles, but it would be

the first informed. France could wait.

Jolivet's fury may be imagined, though under any other circumstances he would have thought it fair warfare. He even endeavored to force the clerk to take his dispatch in preference to that of his rival.

"It is that gentleman's right," answered the clerk coolly, pointing to Blount, and smiling in the most amiable manner. And he continued faithfully to transmit to the Daily Telegraph the well-known verses of Cowper.

Whilst he was working Blount walked to the window and, his field glass to his eyes, watched all that was going on in the neighborhood of Kolyvan, so as to complete his information. In a few minutes he resumed his place at the wicket, and added to his telegram: "Two churches are in flames. The fire appears to gain on the right. 'John Gilpin's spouse said to her dear, Though wedded we have been these twice ten tedious years, yet we no holiday have seen.'"

Alcide Jolivet would have liked to strangle the honorable correspondent of the Daily Telegraph.

He again interrupted the clerk, who, quite unmoved, merely replied: "It is his right, sir, it is his right--at ten copecks a word."

And he telegraphed the following news, just brought him by Blount:

"Russian fugitives are escaping from the town. 'Away went Gilpin--who but he? His fame soon spread around: He carries weight! he rides a race! 'Tis for a thousand pound!'" And Blount turned round with a quizzical look at his rival.

Alcide Jolivet fumed.

In the meanwhile Harry Blount had returned to the window, but this time his attention was diverted by the interest of the scene before him. Therefore, when the clerk had finished telegraphing the last lines dictated by Blount, Alcide Jolivet noiselessly took his place at the wicket, and, just as his rival had done, after quietly depositing a respectable pile of roubles on the shelf, he delivered his dispatch, which the clerk read aloud: "Madeleine Jolivet, 10, Faubourg Montmartre, Paris.

"From Kolyvan, Government of Omsk, Siberia, 6th August.

"Fugitives are escaping from the town. Russians defeated. Fiercely pursued by the Tartar cavalry."

And as Harry Blount returned he heard Jolivet completing his telegram by singing in a mocking tone:

"II est un petit homme, Tout habille de gris, Dans Paris!"

Imitating his rival, Alcide Jolivet had used a merry refrain of Beranger.

"Hallo!" said Harry Blount.

"Just so," answered Jolivet.

In the meantime the situation at Kolyvan was alarming in the extreme. The battle was raging nearer, and the firing was incessant.

At that moment the telegraph office shook to its foundations. A shell had made a hole in the wall, and a cloud of dust filled the office.

Alcide was just finishing writing his lines; but to stop, dart on the shell, seize it in both hands, throw it out of the window, and return to the wicket, was only the affair of a moment.

Five seconds later the shell burst outside. Continuing with the greatest possible coolness, Alcide wrote: "A six-inch shell has just blown up the wall of the telegraph office. Expecting a few more of the same size."

Michael Strogoff had no doubt that the Russians were driven out of Kolyvan. His last resource was to set out across the southern steppe.

Just then renewed firing broke out close to the telegraph house, and a perfect shower of bullets smashed all the glass in the windows. Harry

Blount fell to the ground wounded in the shoulder.

Jolivet even at such a moment, was about to add this postscript to his dispatch: "Harry Blount, correspondent of the Daily Telegraph, has fallen at my side struck by--" when the imperturbable clerk said calmly: "Sir, the wire has broken." And, leaving his wicket, he quietly took his hat, brushed it round with his sleeve, and, still smiling, disappeared through a little door which Michael had not before perceived.

The house was surrounded by Tartar soldiers, and neither Michael nor the reporters could effect their retreat.

Alcide Jolivet, his useless dispatch in his hand, had run to Blount, stretched on the ground, and had bravely lifted him on his shoulders, with the intention of flying with him. He was too late!

Both were prisoners; and, at the same time, Michael, taken unawares as he was about to leap from the window, fell into the hands of the Tartars!

END OF BOOK I