BOOK II

CHAPTER I A TARTAR CAMP

AT a day's march from Kolyvan, several versts beyond the town of Diachinks, stretches a wide plain, planted here and there with great trees, principally pines and cedars. This part of the steppe is usually occupied during the warm season by Siberian shepherds, and their numerous flocks. But now it might have been searched in vain for one of its nomad inhabitants. Not that the plain was deserted. It presented a most animated appearance.

There stood the Tartar tents; there Feofar-Khan, the terrible Emir of Bokhara, was encamped; and there on the following day, the 7th of August, were brought the prisoners taken at Kolyvan after the annihilation of the Russian force, which had vainly attempted to oppose the progress of the invaders. Of the two thousand men who had engaged with the two columns of the enemy, the bases of which rested on Tomsk and Omsk, only a few hundred remained. Thus events were going badly, and the imperial government appeared to have lost its power beyond the frontiers of the Ural--for a time at least, for the Russians could not fail eventually to defeat the savage hordes of the invaders. But in the meantime the invasion had reached the center of Siberia, and it was spreading through the revolted country both to the eastern, and

the western provinces. If the troops of the Amoor and the province of Takutsk did not arrive in time to occupy it, Irkutsk, the capital of Asiatic Russia, being insufficiently garrisoned, would fall into the hands of the Tartars, and the Grand Duke, brother of the Emperor, would be sacrificed to the vengeance of Ivan Ogareff.

What had become of Michael Strogoff? Had he broken down under the weight of so many trials? Did he consider himself conquered by the series of disasters which, since the adventure of Ichim, had increased in magnitude? Did he think his cause lost? that his mission had failed? that his orders could no longer be obeyed?

Michael was one of those men who never give in while life exists. He was yet alive; he still had the imperial letter safe; his disguise had been undiscovered. He was included amongst the numerous prisoners whom the Tartars were dragging with them like cattle; but by approaching Tomsk he was at the same time drawing nearer to Irkutsk. Besides, he was still in front of Ivan Ogareff.

"I will get there!" he repeated to himself.

Since the affair of Kolyvan all the powers of his mind were concentrated on one object--to become free! How should he escape from the Emir's soldiers?

Feofar's camp presented a magnificent spectacle.

Numberless tents, of skin, felt, or silk, glistened in the rays of the sun. The lofty plumes which surmounted their conical tops waved amidst banners, flags, and pennons of every color. The richest of these tents belonged to the Seides and Khodjas, who are the principal personages of the khanat. A special pavilion, ornamented with a horse's tail issuing from a sheaf of red and white sticks artistically interlaced, indicated the high rank of these Tartar chiefs. Then in the distance rose several thousand of the Turcoman tents, called "karaoy," which had been carried on the backs of camels.

The camp contained at least a hundred and fifty thousand soldiers, as many foot as horse soldiers, collected under the name of Alamanes. Amongst them, and as the principal types of Turkestan, would have been directly remarked the Tadjiks, from their regular features, white skin, tall forms, and black eyes and hair; they formed the bulk of the Tartar army, and of them the khanats of Khokhand and Koundouge had furnished a contingent nearly equal to that of Bokhara. With the Tadjiks were mingled specimens of different races who either reside in Turkestan or whose native countries border on it. There were Usbecks, red-bearded, small in stature, similar to those who had pursued Michael. Here were Kirghiz, with flat faces like the Kalmucks, dressed in coats of mail: some carried the lance, bows, and arrows of Asiatic manufacture; some the saber, a matchlock gun, and the "tschakane," a little short-handled ax, the wounds from which invariably prove fatal. There were Mongols--of middle height, with black hair plaited into pigtails, which hung down

their back; round faces, swarthy complexions, lively deep-set eyes, scanty beards--dressed in blue nankeen trimmed with black plush, sword-belts of leather with silver buckles, coats gayly braided, and silk caps edged with fur and three ribbons fluttering behind. Brown-skinned Afghans, too, might have been seen. Arabs, having the primitive type of the beautiful Semitic races; and Turcomans, with eyes which looked as if they had lost the pupil,--all enrolled under the Emir's flag, the flag of incendiaries and devastators.

Among these free soldiers were a certain number of slave soldiers, principally Persians, commanded by officers of the same nation, and they were certainly not the least esteemed of Feofar-Khan's army.

If to this list are added the Jews, who acted as servants, their robes confined with a cord, and wearing on their heads instead of the turban, which is forbidden them, little caps of dark cloth; if with these groups are mingled some hundreds of "kalenders," a sort of religious mendicants, clothed in rags, covered by a leopard skin, some idea may be formed of the enormous agglomerations of different tribes included under the general denomination of the Tartar army.

Nothing could be more romantic than this picture, in delineating which the most skillful artist would have exhausted all the colors of his palette.

Feofar's tent overlooked the others. Draped in large folds of a

brilliant silk looped with golden cords and tassels, surmounted by tall plumes which waved in the wind like fans, it occupied the center of a wide clearing, sheltered by a grove of magnificent birch and pine trees. Before this tent, on a japanned table inlaid with precious stones, was placed the sacred book of the Koran, its pages being of thin gold-leaf delicately engraved. Above floated the Tartar flag, quartered with the Emir's arms.

In a semicircle round the clearing stood the tents of the great functionaries of Bokhara. There resided the chief of the stables, who has the right to follow the Emir on horseback even into the court of his palace; the grand falconer; the "housch-begui," bearer of the royal seal; the "toptschi-baschi," grand master of the artillery; the "khodja," chief of the council, who receives the prince's kiss, and may present himself before him with his girdle untied; the "scheikh-oul-islam," chief of the Ulemas, representing the priests; the "cazi-askev," who, in the Emir's absence settles all disputes raised among the soldiers; and lastly, the chief of the astrologers, whose great business is to consult the stars every time the Khan thinks of changing his quarters.

When the prisoners were brought into the camp, the Emir was in his tent. He did not show himself. This was fortunate, no doubt. A sign, a word from him might have been the signal for some bloody execution. But he intrenched himself in that isolation which constitutes in part the majesty of Eastern kings. He who does not show himself is admired, and,

above all, feared.

As to the prisoners, they were to be penned up in some enclosure, where, ill-treated, poorly fed, and exposed to all the inclemencies of the weather, they would await Feofar's pleasure.

The most docile and patient of them all was undoubtedly Michael Strogoff. He allowed himself to be led, for they were leading him where he wished to go, and under conditions of safety which free he could not have found on the road from Kolyvan to Tomsk. To escape before reaching that town was to risk again falling into the hands of the scouts, who were scouring the steppe. The most eastern line occupied by the Tartar columns was not situated beyond the eighty-fifth meridian, which passes through Tomsk. This meridian once passed, Michael considered that he should be beyond the hostile zones, that he could traverse Genisci without danger, and gain Krasnoiarsk before Feofar-Khan had invaded the province.

"Once at Tomsk," he repeated to himself, to repress some feelings of impatience which he could not entirely master, "in a few minutes I should be beyond the outposts; and twelve hours gained on Feofar, twelve hours on Ogareff, that surely would be enough to give me a start of them to Irkutsk."

The thing that Michael dreaded more than everything else was the presence of Ivan Ogareff in the Tartar camp. Besides the danger of being

recognized, he felt, by a sort of instinct, that this was the traitor whom it was especially necessary to precede. He understood, too, that the union of Ogareff's troops with those of Feofar would complete the invading army, and that the junction once effected, the army would march en masse on the capital of Eastern Siberia. All his apprehensions came from this quarter, and he dreaded every instant to hear some flourish of trumpets, announcing the arrival of the lieutenant of the Emir.

To this was added the thought of his mother, of Nadia,--the one a prisoner at Omsk; the other dragged on board the Irtych boats, and no doubt a captive, as Marfa Strogoff was. He could do nothing for them. Should he ever see them again? At this question, to which he dared not reply, his heart sank very low.

At the same time with Michael Strogoff and so many other prisoners Harry Blount and Alcide Jolivet had also been taken to the Tartar camp. Their former traveling companion, captured like them at the telegraph office, knew that they were penned up with him in the enclosure, guarded by numerous sentinels, but he did not wish to accost them. It mattered little to him, at this time especially, what they might think of him since the affair at Ichim. Besides, he desired to be alone, that he might act alone, if necessary. He therefore held himself aloof from his former acquaintances.

From the moment that Harry Blount had fallen by his side, Jolivet had not ceased his attentions to him. During the journey from Kolyvan to

the camp--that is to say, for several hours--Blount, by leaning on his companion's arm, had been enabled to follow the rest of the prisoners. He tried to make known that he was a British subject; but it had no effect on the barbarians, who only replied by prods with a lance or sword. The correspondent of the Daily Telegraph was, therefore, obliged to submit to the common lot, resolving to protest later, and obtain satisfaction for such treatment. But the journey was not the less disagreeable to him, for his wound caused him much pain, and without Alcide Jolivet's assistance he might never have reached the camp.

Jolivet, whose practical philosophy never abandoned him, had physically and morally strengthened his companion by every means in his power. His first care, when they found themselves definitely established in the enclosure, was to examine Blount's wound. Having managed carefully to draw off his coat, he found that the shoulder had been only grazed by the shot.

"This is nothing," he said. "A mere scratch! After two or three dressings you will be all to rights."

"But these dressings?" asked Blount.

"I will make them for you myself."

"Then you are something of a doctor?"

"All Frenchmen are something of doctors."

And on this affirmation Alcide, tearing his handkerchief, made lint of one piece, bandages of the other, took some water from a well dug in the middle of the enclosure, bathed the wound, and skillfully placed the wet rag on Harry Blount's shoulder.

"I treat you with water," he said. "This liquid is the most efficacious sedative known for the treatment of wounds, and is the most employed now. Doctors have taken six thousand years to discover that! Yes, six thousand years in round numbers!"

"I thank you, M. Jolivet," answered Harry, stretching himself on a bed of dry leaves, which his companion had arranged for him in the shade of a birch tree.

"Bah! it's nothing! You would do as much for me."

"I am not quite so sure," said Blount candidly.

"Nonsense, stupid! All English are generous."

"Doubtless; but the French?"

"Well, the French--they are brutes, if you like! But what redeems them is that they are French. Say nothing more about that, or rather, say

nothing more at all. Rest is absolutely necessary for you."

But Harry Blount had no wish to be silent. If the wound, in prudence, required rest, the correspondent of the Daily Telegraph was not a man to indulge himself.

"M. Jolivet," he asked, "do you think that our last dispatches have been able to pass the Russian frontier?"

"Why not?" answered Alcide. "By this time you may be sure that my beloved cousin knows all about the affair at Kolyvan."

"How many copies does your cousin work off of her dispatches?" asked Blount, for the first time putting his question direct to his companion.

"Well," answered Alcide, laughing, "my cousin is a very discreet person, who does not like to be talked about, and who would be in despair if she troubled the sleep of which you are in need."

"I don't wish to sleep," replied the Englishman. "What will your cousin think of the affairs of Russia?"

"That they seem for the time in a bad way. But, bah! the Muscovite government is powerful; it cannot be really uneasy at an invasion of barbarians."

"Too much ambition has lost the greatest empires," answered Blount, who was not exempt from a certain English jealousy with regard to Russian pretensions in Central Asia.

"Oh, do not let us talk politics," cried Jolivet. "It is forbidden by the faculty. Nothing can be worse for wounds in the shoulder--unless it was to put you to sleep."

"Let us, then, talk of what we ought to do," replied Blount. "M. Jolivet, I have no intention at all of remaining a prisoner to these Tartars for an indefinite time."

"Nor I, either, by Jove!"

"We will escape on the first opportunity?"

"Yes, if there is no other way of regaining our liberty."

"Do you know of any other?" asked Blount, looking at his companion.

"Certainly. We are not belligerents; we are neutral, and we will claim our freedom."

"From that brute of a Feofar-Khan?"

"No; he would not understand," answered Jolivet; "but from his

lieutenant, Ivan Ogareff."

"He is a villain."

"No doubt; but the villain is a Russian. He knows that it does not do to trifle with the rights of men, and he has no interest to retain us; on the contrary. But to ask a favor of that gentleman does not quite suit my taste."

"But that gentleman is not in the camp, or at least I have not seen him here," observed Blount.

"He will come. He will not fail to do that. He must join the Emir. Siberia is cut in two now, and very certainly Feofar's army is only waiting for him to advance on Irkutsk."

"And once free, what shall we do?"

"Once free, we will continue our campaign, and follow the Tartars, until the time comes when we can make our way into the Russian camp. We must not give up the game. No, indeed; we have only just begun. You, friend, have already had the honor of being wounded in the service of the Daily Telegraph, whilst I--I have as yet suffered nothing in my cousin's service. Well, well! Good," murmured Alcide Jolivet; "there he is asleep. A few hours' sleep and a few cold water compresses are all that are required to set an Englishman on his legs again. These fellows are

made of cast iron."

And whilst Harry Blount rested, Alcide watched near him, after having drawn out his note book, which he loaded with notes, determined besides to share them with his companion, for the greater satisfaction of the readers of the Daily Telegraph. Events had united them one with the other. They were no longer jealous of each other. So, then, the thing that Michael Strogoff dreaded above everything was the most lively desire of the two correspondents. Ivan Ogareff's arrival would evidently be of use to them. Blount and Jolivet's interest was, therefore, contrary to that of Michael. The latter well understood the situation, and it was one reason, added to many others, which prevented him from approaching his former traveling companions. He therefore managed so as not to be seen by them.

Four days passed thus without the state of things being in anywise altered. The prisoners heard no talk of the breaking up of the Tartar camp. They were strictly guarded. It would have been impossible for them to pass the cordon of foot and horse soldiers, which watched them night and day. As to the food which was given them it was barely sufficient. Twice in the twenty-four hours they were thrown a piece of the intestines of goats grilled on the coals, or a few bits of that cheese called "kroute," made of sour ewe's milk, and which, soaked in mare's milk, forms the Kirghiz dish, commonly called "koumyss." And this was all. It may be added that the weather had become detestable. There were considerable atmospheric commotions, bringing squalls mingled with rain.

The unfortunate prisoners, destitute of shelter, had to bear all the inclemencies of the weather, nor was there the slightest alleviation to their misery. Several wounded women and children died, and the prisoners were themselves compelled to dig graves for the bodies of those whom their jailers would not even take the trouble to bury.

During this trying period Alcide Jolivet and Michael Strogoff worked hard, each in the portions of the enclosure in which they found themselves. Healthy and vigorous, they suffered less than so many others, and could better endure the hardships to which they were exposed. By their advice, and the assistance they rendered, they were of the greatest possible use to their suffering and despairing fellow-captives.

Was this state of things to last? Would Feofar-Khan, satisfied with his first success, wait some time before marching on Irkutsk? Such, it was to be feared, would be the case. But it was not so. The event so much wished for by Jolivet and Blount, so much dreaded by Michael, occurred on the morning of the 12th of August.

On that day the trumpets sounded, the drums beat, the cannon roared. A huge cloud of dust swept along the road from Kolyvan. Ivan Ogareff, followed by several thousand men, made his entry into the Tartar camp.

CHAPTER II CORRESPONDENTS IN TROUBLE

IVAN OGAREFF was bringing up the main body of the army of the Emir. The cavalry and infantry now under him had formed part of the column which had taken Omsk. Ogareff, not having been able to reduce the high town, in which, it must be remembered, the governor and garrison had sought refuge, had decided to pass on, not wishing to delay operations which ought to lead to the conquest of Eastern Siberia. He therefore left a garrison in Omsk, and, reinforcing himself en route with the conquerors of Kolyvan, joined Feofar's army.

Ivan Ogareff's soldiers halted at the outposts of the camp. They received no orders to bivouac. Their chief's plan, doubtless, was not to halt there, but to press on and reach Tomsk in the shortest possible time, it being an important town, naturally intended to become the center of future operations.

Besides his soldiers, Ogareff was bringing a convoy of Russian and Siberian prisoners, captured either at Omsk or Kolyvan. These unhappy creatures were not led to the enclosure--already too crowded--but were forced to remain at the outposts without shelter, almost without nourishment. What fate was Feofar-Khan reserving for these unfortunates? Would he imprison them in Tomsk, or would some bloody execution, familiar to the Tartar chiefs, remove them when they were found too inconvenient? This was the secret of the capricious Emir.

This army had not come from Omsk and Kolyvan without bringing in its train the usual crowd of beggars, freebooters, pedlars, and gypsies, which compose the rear-guard of an army on the march.

All these people lived on the country traversed, and left little of anything behind them. There was, therefore, a necessity for pushing forward, if only to secure provisions for the troops. The whole region between Ichim and the Obi, now completely devastated, no longer offered any resources. The Tartars left a desert behind them.

Conspicuous among the gypsies who had hastened from the western provinces was the Tsigane troop, which had accompanied Michael Strogoff as far as Perm. Sangarre was there. This fierce spy, the tool of Ivan Ogareff, had not deserted her master. Ogareff had traveled rapidly to Ichim, whilst Sangarre and her band had proceeded to Omsk by the southern part of the province.

It may be easily understood how useful this woman was to Ogareff. With her gypsy-band she could penetrate anywhere. Ivan Ogareff was kept acquainted with all that was going on in the very heart of the invaded provinces. There were a hundred eyes, a hundred ears, open in his service. Besides, he paid liberally for this espionage, from which he derived so much advantage.

Once Sangarre, being implicated in a very serious affair, had been saved by the Russian officer. She never forgot what she owed him, and had

devoted herself to his service body and soul.

When Ivan Ogareff entered on the path of treason, he saw at once how he might turn this woman to account. Whatever order he might give her, Sangarre would execute it. An inexplicable instinct, more powerful still than that of gratitude, had urged her to make herself the slave of the traitor to whom she had been attached since the very beginning of his exile in Siberia.

Confidante and accomplice, Sangarre, without country, without family, had been delighted to put her vagabond life to the service of the invaders thrown by Ogareff on Siberia. To the wonderful cunning natural to her race she added a wild energy, which knew neither forgiveness nor pity. She was a savage worthy to share the wigwam of an Apache or the hut of an Andaman.

Since her arrival at Omsk, where she had rejoined him with her Tsiganes, Sangarre had not again left Ogareff. The circumstance that Michael and Marfa Strogoff had met was known to her. She knew and shared Ogareff's fears concerning the journey of a courier of the Czar. Having Marfa Strogoff in her power, she would have been the woman to torture her with all the refinement of a Redskin in order to wrest her secret from her. But the hour had not yet come in which Ogareff wished the old Siberian to speak. Sangarre had to wait, and she waited, without losing sight of her whom she was watching, observing her slightest gestures, her slightest words, endeavoring to catch the word "son" escaping from her

lips, but as yet always baffled by Marfa's taciturnity.

At the first flourish of the trumpets several officers of high rank, followed by a brilliant escort of Usbeck horsemen, moved to the front of the camp to receive Ivan Ogareff. Arrived in his presence, they paid him the greatest respect, and invited him to accompany them to Feofar-Khan's tent.

Imperturbable as usual, Ogareff replied coldly to the deference paid to him. He was plainly dressed; but, from a sort of impudent bravado, he still wore the uniform of a Russian officer.

As he was about to enter the camp, Sangarre, passing among the officers approached and remained motionless before him. "Nothing?" asked Ogareff.

"Nothing."

"Have patience."

"Is the time approaching when you will force the old woman to speak?"

"It is approaching, Sangarre."

"When will the old woman speak?"

"When we reach Tomsk."

"And we shall be there--"

"In three days."

A strange gleam shot from Sangarre's great black eyes, and she retired with a calm step. Ogareff pressed his spurs into his horse's flanks, and, followed by his staff of Tartar officers, rode towards the Emir's tent.

Feofar-Khan was expecting his lieutenant. The council, composed of the bearer of the royal seal, the khodja, and some high officers, had taken their places in the tent. Ivan Ogareff dismounted and entered.

Feofar-Khan was a man of forty, tall, rather pale, of a fierce countenance, and evil eyes. A curly black beard flowed over his chest. With his war costume, coat of mail of gold and silver, cross-belt and scabbard glistening with precious stones, boots with golden spurs, helmet ornamented with an aigrette of brilliant diamonds, Feofar presented an aspect rather strange than imposing for a Tartar Sardana-palus, an undisputed sovereign, who directs at his pleasure the life and fortune of his subjects.

When Ivan Ogareff appeared, the great dignitaries remained seated on their gold-embroidered cushions; but Feofar rose from a rich divan which occupied the back part of the tent, the ground being hidden under the

thick velvet-pile of a Bokharian carpet.

The Emir approached Ogareff and gave him a kiss, the meaning of which he could not mistake. This kiss made the lieutenant chief of the council, and placed him temporarily above the khodja.

Then Feofar spoke. "I have no need to question you," said he; "speak, Ivan. You will find here ears very ready to listen to you."

"Takhsir," answered Ogareff, "this is what I have to make known to you." He spoke in the Tartar language, giving to his phrases the emphatic turn which distinguishes the languages of the Orientals. "Takhsir, this is not the time for unnecessary words. What I have done at the head of your troops, you know. The lines of the Ichim and the Irtych are now in our power; and the Turcoman horsemen can bathe their horses in the now Tartar waters. The Kirghiz hordes rose at the voice of Feofar-Khan. You can now push your troops towards the east, and where the sun rises, or towards the west, where he sets."

"And if I march with the sun?" asked the Emir, without his countenance betraying any of his thoughts.

"To march with the sun," answered Ogareff, "is to throw yourself towards Europe; it is to conquer rapidly the Siberian provinces of Tobolsk as far as the Ural Mountains."

"And if I go to meet this luminary of the heavens?"

"It is to subdue to the Tartar dominion, with Irkutsk, the richest countries of Central Asia."

"But the armies of the Sultan of St. Petersburg?" said Feofar-Khan, designating the Emperor of Russia by this strange title.

"You have nothing to fear from them," replied Ivan Ogareff. "The invasion has been sudden; and before the Russian army can succor them, Irkutsk or Tobolsk will have fallen into your power. The Czar's troops have been overwhelmed at Kolyvan, as they will be everywhere where yours meet them."

"And what advice does your devotion to the Tartar cause suggest?" asked the Emir, after a few moments' silence.

"My advice," answered Ivan Ogareff quickly, "is to march to meet the sun. It is to give the grass of the eastern steppes to the Turcoman horses to consume. It is to take Irkutsk, the capital of the eastern provinces, and with it a hostage, the possession of whom is worth a whole country. In the place of the Czar, the Grand Duke his brother must fall into your hands."

This was the great result aimed at by Ivan Ogareff. To listen to him, one would have taken him for one of the cruel descendants of Stephan

Razine, the celebrated pirate who ravaged Southern Russia in the eighteenth century. To seize the Grand Duke, murder him pitilessly, would fully satisfy his hatred. Besides, with the capture of Irkutsk, all Eastern Siberia would pass to the Tartars.

"It shall be thus, Ivan," replied Feofar.

"What are your orders, Takhsir?"

"To-day our headquarters shall be removed to Tomsk."

Ogareff bowed, and, followed by the housch-begui, he retired to execute the Emir's orders.

As he was about to mount his horse, to return to the outposts, a tumult broke out at some distance, in the part of the camp reserved for the prisoners. Shouts were heard, and two or three shots fired. Perhaps it was an attempt at revolt or escape, which must be summarily suppressed.

Ivan Ogareff and the housch-begui walked forward and almost immediately two men, whom the soldiers had not been able to keep back appeared before them.

The housch-begui, without more information, made a sign which was an order for death, and the heads of the two prisoners would have rolled on the ground had not Ogareff uttered a few words which arrested the sword

already raised aloft. The Russian had perceived that these prisoners were strangers, and he ordered them to be brought to him.

They were Harry Blount and Alcide jolivet.

On Ogareff's arrival in the camp, they had demanded to be conducted to his presence. The soldiers had refused. In consequence, a struggle, an attempt at flight, shots fired which happily missed the two correspondents, but their execution would not have been long delayed, if it had not been for the intervention of the Emir's lieutenant.

The latter observed the prisoners for some moments, they being absolutely unknown to him. They had been present at that scene in the post-house at Ichim, in which Michael Strogoff had been struck by Ogareff; but the brutal traveler had paid no attention to the persons then collected in the common room.

Blount and Jolivet, on the contrary, recognized him at once, and the latter said in a low voice, "Hullo! It seems that Colonel Ogareff and the rude personage of Ichim are one!" Then he added in his companion's ear, "Explain our affair, Blount. You will do me a service. This Russian colonel in the midst of a Tartar camp disgusts me; and although, thanks to him, my head is still on my shoulders, my eyes would exhibit my feelings were I to attempt to look him in the face."

So saying, Alcide Jolivet assumed a look of complete and haughty

indifference.

Whether or not Ivan Ogareff perceived that the prisoner's attitude was insulting towards him, he did not let it appear. "Who are you, gentlemen?" he asked in Russian, in a cold tone, but free from its usual rudeness.

"Two correspondents of English and French newspapers," replied Blount laconically.

"You have, doubtless, papers which will establish your identity?"

"Here are letters which accredit us in Russia, from the English and French chancellor's office."

Ivan Ogareff took the letters which Blount held out, and read them attentively. "You ask," said he, "authorization to follow our military operations in Siberia?"

"We ask to be free, that is all," answered the English correspondent dryly.

"You are so, gentlemen," answered Ogareff; "I am curious to read your articles in the Daily Telegraph."

"Sir," replied Blount, with the most imperturbable coolness, "it is

sixpence a number, including postage." And thereupon he returned to his companion, who appeared to approve completely of his replies.

Ivan Ogareff, without frowning, mounted his horse, and going to the head of his escort, soon disappeared in a cloud of dust.

"Well, Jolivet, what do you think of Colonel Ivan Ogareff, general-in-chief of the Tartar troops?" asked Blount.

"I think, my dear friend," replied Alcide, smiling, "that the housch-begui made a very graceful gesture when he gave the order for our heads to be cut off."

Whatever was the motive which led Ogareff to act thus in regard to the two correspondents, they were free and could rove at their pleasure over the scene of war. Their intention was not to leave it. The sort of antipathy which formerly they had entertained for each other had given place to a sincere friendship. Circumstances having brought them together, they no longer thought of separating. The petty questions of rivalry were forever extinguished. Harry Blount could never forget what he owed his companion, who, on the other hand, never tried to remind him of it. This friendship too assisted the reporting operations, and was thus to the advantage of their readers.

"And now," asked Blount, "what shall we do with our liberty?"

"Take advantage of it, of course," replied Alcide, "and go quietly to Tomsk to see what is going on there."

"Until the time--very near, I hope--when we may rejoin some Russian regiment?"

"As you say, my dear Blount, it won't do to Tartarise ourselves too much. The best side is that of the most civilized army, and it is evident that the people of Central Asia will have everything to lose and absolutely nothing to gain from this invasion, while the Russians will soon repulse them. It is only a matter of time."

The arrival of Ivan Ogareff, which had given Jolivet and Blount their liberty, was to Michael Strogoff, on the contrary, a serious danger. Should chance bring the Czar's courier into Ogareff's presence, the latter could not fail to recognize in him the traveler whom he had so brutally treated at the Ichim post-house, and although Michael had not replied to the insult as he would have done under any other circumstances, attention would be drawn to him, and at once the accomplishment of his plans would be rendered more difficult.

This was the unpleasant side of the business. A favorable result of his arrival, however, was the order which was given to raise the camp that very day, and remove the headquarters to Tomsk. This was the accomplishment of Michael's most fervent desire. His intention, as has been said, was to reach Tomsk concealed amongst the other prisoners;

that is to say, without any risk of falling into the hands of the scouts who swarmed about the approaches to this important town. However, in consequence of the arrival of Ivan Ogareff, he questioned whether it would not be better to give up his first plan and attempt to escape during the journey.

Michael would, no doubt, have kept to the latter plan had he not learnt that Feofar-Khan and Ogareff had already set out for the town with some thousands of horsemen. "I will wait, then," said he to himself; "at least, unless some exceptional opportunity for escape occurs. The adverse chances are numerous on this side of Tomsk, while beyond I shall in a few hours have passed the most advanced Tartar posts to the east. Still three days of patience, and may God aid me!"

It was indeed a journey of three days which the prisoners, under the guard of a numerous detachment of Tartars, were to make across the steppe. A hundred and fifty versts lay between the camp and the town--an easy march for the Emir's soldiers, who wanted for nothing, but a wretched journey for these people, enfeebled by privations. More than one corpse would show the road they had traversed.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon, on the 12th of August, under a hot sun and cloudless sky, that the toptschi-baschi gave the order to start.

Alcide and Blount, having bought horses, had already taken the road to Tomsk, where events were to reunite the principal personages of this

story.

Amongst the prisoners brought by Ivan Ogareff to the Tartar camp was an old woman, whose taciturnity seemed to keep her apart from all those who shared her fate. Not a murmur issued from her lips. She was like a statue of grief. This woman was more strictly guarded than anyone else, and, without her appearing to notice, was constantly watched by the Tsigane Sangarre. Notwithstanding her age she was compelled to follow the convoy of prisoners on foot, without any alleviation of her suffering.

However, a kind Providence had placed near her a courageous, kind-hearted being to comfort and assist her. Amongst her companions in misfortune a young girl, remarkable for beauty and taciturnity, seemed to have given herself the task of watching over her. No words had been exchanged between the two captives, but the girl was always at the old woman's side when help was useful. At first the mute assistance of the stranger was accepted with some mistrust. Gradually, however, the young girl's clear glance, her reserve, and the mysterious sympathy which draws together those who are in misfortune, thawed Marfa Strogoff's coldness.

Nadia--for it was she--was thus able, without knowing it, to render to the mother those attentions which she had herself received from the son. Her instinctive kindness had doubly inspired her. In devoting herself to her service, Nadia secured to her youth and beauty the protection

afforded by the age of the old prisoner.

On the crowd of unhappy people, embittered by sufferings, this silent pair--one seeming to be the grandmother, the other the grand-daughter--imposed a sort of respect.

After being carried off by the Tartar scouts on the Irtych, Nadia had been taken to Omsk. Kept prisoner in the town, she shared the fate of all those captured by Ivan Ogareff, and consequently that of Marfa Strogoff.

If Nadia had been less energetic, she would have succumbed to this double blow. The interruption to her journey, the death of Michael, made her both desperate and excited. Divided, perhaps forever, from her father, after so many happy efforts had brought her near him, and, to crown her grief, separated from the intrepid companion whom God seemed to have placed in her way to lead her. The image of Michael Strogoff, struck before her eyes with a lance and disappearing beneath the waters of the Irtych, never left her thoughts.

Could such a man have died thus? For whom was God reserving His miracles if this good man, whom a noble object was urging onwards, had been allowed to perish so miserably? Then anger would prevail over grief. The scene of the affront so strangely borne by her companion at the Ichim relay returned to her memory. Her blood boiled at the recollection.

"Who will avenge him who can no longer avenge himself?" she said.

And in her heart, she cried, "May it be I!" If before his death Michael had confided his secret to her, woman, aye girl though she was, she might have been able to carry to a successful conclusion the interrupted task of that brother whom God had so soon taken from her.

Absorbed in these thoughts, it can be understood how Nadia could remain insensible to the miseries even of her captivity. Thus chance had united her to Marfa Strogoff without her having the least suspicion of who she was. How could she imagine that this old woman, a prisoner like herself, was the mother of him, whom she only knew as the merchant Nicholas Korpanoff? And on the other hand, how could Marfa guess that a bond of gratitude connected this young stranger with her son?

The thing that first struck Nadia in Marfa Strogoff was the similarity in the way in which each bore her hard fate. This stoicism of the old woman under the daily hardships, this contempt of bodily suffering, could only be caused by a moral grief equal to her own. So Nadia thought; and she was not mistaken. It was an instinctive sympathy for that part of her misery which Marfa did not show which first drew Nadia towards her. This way of bearing her sorrow went to the proud heart of the young girl. She did not offer her services; she gave them. Marfa had neither to refuse nor accept them. In the difficult parts of the journey, the girl was there to support her. When the provisions were given out, the old woman would not have moved, but Nadia shared her

small portion with her; and thus this painful journey was performed. Thanks to her companion, Marfa was able to follow the soldiers who guarded the prisoners without being fastened to a saddle-bow, as were many other unfortunate wretches, and thus dragged along this road of sorrow.

"May God reward you, my daughter, for what you have done for my old age!" said Marfa Strogoff once, and for some time these were the only words exchanged between the two unfortunate beings.

During these few days, which to them appeared like centuries, it would seem that the old woman and the girl would have been led to speak of their situation. But Marfa Strogoff, from a caution which may be easily understood, never spoke about herself except with the greatest brevity. She never made the smallest allusion to her son, nor to the unfortunate meeting.

Nadia also, if not completely silent, spoke little. However, one day her heart overflowed, and she told all the events which had occurred from her departure from Wladimir to the death of Nicholas Korpanoff.

All that her young companion told intensely interested the old Siberian. "Nicholas Korpanoff!" said she. "Tell me again about this Nicholas.
I know only one man, one alone, in whom such conduct would not have astonished me. Nicholas Korpanoff! Was that really his name? Are you sure of it, my daughter?"

"Why should he have deceived me in this," replied Nadia, "when he deceived me in no other way?"

Moved, however, by a kind of presentiment, Marfa Strogoff put questions upon questions to Nadia.

"You told me he was fearless, my daughter. You have proved that he has been so?" asked she.

"Yes, fearless indeed!" replied Nadia.

"It was just what my son would have done," said Marfa to herself.

Then she resumed, "Did you not say that nothing stopped him, nor astonished him; that he was so gentle in his strength that you had a sister as well as a brother in him, and he watched over you like a mother?"

"Yes, yes," said Nadia. "Brother, sister, mother--he has been all to me!"

"And defended you like a lion?"

"A lion indeed!" replied Nadia. "A lion, a hero!"

"My son, my son!" thought the old Siberian. "But you said, however, that he bore a terrible insult at that post-house in Ichim?"

"He did bear it," answered Nadia, looking down.

"He bore it!" murmured Marfa, shuddering.

"Mother, mother," cried Nadia, "do not blame him! He had a secret. A secret of which God alone is as yet the judge!"

"And," said Marfa, raising her head and looking at Nadia as though she would read the depths of her heart, "in that hour of humiliation did you not despise this Nicholas Korpanoff?"

"I admired without understanding him," replied the girl. "I never felt him more worthy of respect."

The old woman was silent for a minute.

"Was he tall?" she asked.

"Very tall."

"And very handsome? Come, speak, my daughter."

"He was very handsome," replied Nadia, blushing.

"It was my son! I tell you it was my son!" exclaimed the old woman, embracing Nadia.

"Your son!" said Nadia amazed, "your son!"

"Come," said Marfa; "let us get to the bottom of this, my child. Your companion, your friend, your protector had a mother. Did he never speak to you of his mother?"

"Of his mother?" said Nadia. "He spoke to me of his mother as I spoke to him of my father--often, always. He adored her."

"Nadia, Nadia, you have just told me about my own son," said the old woman.

And she added impetuously, "Was he not going to see this mother, whom you say he loved, in Omsk?"

"No," answered Nadia, "no, he was not."

"Not!" cried Marfa. "You dare to tell me not!"

"I say so: but it remains to me to tell you that from motives which outweighed everything else, motives which I do not know, I understand that Nicholas Korpanoff had to traverse the country completely in

secret. To him it was a question of life and death, and still more, a question of duty and honor."

"Duty, indeed, imperious duty," said the old Siberian, "of those who sacrifice everything, even the joy of giving a kiss, perhaps the last, to his old mother. All that you do not know, Nadia--all that I did not know myself--I now know. You have made me understand everything. But the light which you have thrown on the mysteries of my heart, I cannot return on yours. Since my son has not told you his secret, I must keep it. Forgive me, Nadia; I can never repay what you have done for me."

"Mother, I ask you nothing," replied Nadia.

All was thus explained to the old Siberian, all, even the conduct of her son with regard to herself in the inn at Omsk. There was no doubt that the young girl's companion was Michael Strogoff, and that a secret mission in the invaded country obliged him to conceal his quality of the Czar's courier.

"Ah, my brave boy!" thought Marfa. "No, I will not betray you, and tortures shall not wrest from me the avowal that it was you whom I saw at Omsk."

Marfa could with a word have paid Nadia for all her devotion to her. She could have told her that her companion, Nicholas Korpanoff, or rather Michael Strogoff, had not perished in the waters of the Irtych, since

it was some days after that incident that she had met him, that she had spoken to him.

But she restrained herself, she was silent, and contented herself with saying, "Hope, my child! Misfortune will not overwhelm you. You will see your father again; I feel it; and perhaps he who gave you the name of sister is not dead. God cannot have allowed your brave companion to perish. Hope, my child, hope! Do as I do. The mourning which I wear is not yet for my son."

CHAPTER III BLOW FOR BLOW

SUCH were now the relative situations of Marfa Strogoff and Nadia. All was understood by the old Siberian, and though the young girl was ignorant that her much-regretted companion still lived, she at least knew his relationship to her whom she had made her mother; and she thanked God for having given her the joy of taking the place of the son whom the prisoner had lost.

But what neither of them could know was that Michael, having been captured at Kolyvan, was in the same convoy and was on his way to Tomsk with them.

The prisoners brought by Ivan Ogareff had been added to those already kept by the Emir in the Tartar camp. These unfortunate people, consisting of Russians, Siberians, soldiers and civilians, numbered some thousands, and formed a column which extended over several versts. Some among them being considered dangerous were handcuffed and fastened to a long chain. There were, too, women and children, many of the latter suspended to the pommels of the saddles, while the former were dragged mercilessly along the road on foot, or driven forward as if they were animals. The horsemen compelled them to maintain a certain order, and there were no laggards with the exception of those who fell never to rise again.

In consequence of this arrangement, Michael Strogoff, marching in the

first ranks of those who had left the Tartar camp--that is to say, among the Kolyvan prisoners--was unable to mingle with the prisoners who had arrived after him from Omsk. He had therefore no suspicion that his mother and Nadia were present in the convoy, nor did they suppose that he was among those in front. This journey from the camp to Tomsk, performed under the lashes and spear-points of the soldiers, proved fatal to many, and terrible to all. The prisoners traveled across the steppe, over a road made still more dusty by the passage of the Emir and his vanguard. Orders had been given to march rapidly. The short halts were rare. The hundred miles under a burning sky seemed interminable, though they were performed as rapidly as possible.

The country, which extends from the right of the Obi to the base of the spur detached from the Sayanok Mountains, is very sterile. Only a few stunted and burnt-up shrubs here and there break the monotony of the immense plain. There was no cultivation, for there was no water; and it was water that the prisoners, parched by their painful march, most needed. To find a stream they must have diverged fifty versts eastward, to the very foot of the mountains.

There flows the Tom, a little affluent of the Obi, which passes near Tomsk before losing itself in one of the great northern arteries. There water would have been abundant, the steppe less arid, the heat less severe. But the strictest orders had been given to the commanders of the convoy to reach Tomsk by the shortest way, for the Emir was much afraid of being taken in the flank and cut off by some Russian column

descending from the northern provinces.

It is useless to dwell upon the sufferings of the unhappy prisoners. Many hundreds fell on the steppe, where their bodies would lie until winter, when the wolves would devour the remnants of their bones.

As Nadia helped the old Siberian, so in the same way did Michael render to his more feeble companions in misfortune such services as his situation allowed. He encouraged some, supported others, going to and fro, until a prick from a soldier's lance obliged him to resume the place which had been assigned him in the ranks.

Why did he not endeavor to escape?

The reason was that he had now quite determined not to venture until the steppe was safe for him. He was resolved in his idea of going as far as Tomsk "at the Emir's expense," and indeed he was right. As he observed the numerous detachments which scoured the plain on the convoy's flanks, now to the south, now to the north, it was evident that before he could have gone two versts he must have been recaptured. The Tartar horsemen swarmed--it actually appeared as if they sprang from the earth--like insects which a thunderstorm brings to the surface of the ground. Flight under these conditions would have been extremely difficult, if not impossible. The soldiers of the escort displayed excessive vigilance, for they would have paid for the slightest carelessness with their heads.

At nightfall of the 15th of August, the convoy reached the little village of Zabediero, thirty versts from Tomsk.

The prisoners' first movement would have been to rush into the river, but they were not allowed to leave the ranks until the halt had been organized. Although the current of the Tom was just now like a torrent, it might have favored the flight of some bold or desperate man, and the strictest measures of vigilance were taken. Boats, requisitioned at Zabediero, were brought up to the Tom and formed a line of obstacles impossible to pass. As to the encampment on the outskirts of the village, it was guarded by a cordon of sentinels.

Michael Strogoff, who now naturally thought of escape, saw, after carefully surveying the situation, that under these conditions it was perfectly impossible; so, not wishing to compromise himself, he waited.

The prisoners were to encamp for the whole night on the banks of the Tom, for the Emir had put off the entrance of his troops into Tomsk. It had been decided that a military fete should mark the inauguration of the Tartar headquarters in this important city. Feofar-Khan already occupied the fortress, but the bulk of his army bivouacked under its walls, waiting until the time came for them to make a solemn entry.

Ivan Ogareff left the Emir at Tomsk, where both had arrived the evening before, and returned to the camp at Zabediero. From here he was to start

the next day with the rear-guard of the Tartar army. A house had been arranged for him in which to pass the night. At sunrise horse and foot soldiers were to proceed to Tomsk, where the Emir wished to receive them with the pomp usual to Asiatic sovereigns. As soon as the halt was organized, the prisoners, worn out with their three days' journey, and suffering from burning thirst, could drink and take a little rest. The sun had already set, when Nadia, supporting Marfa Strogoff, reached the banks of the Tom. They had not till then been able to get through those who crowded the banks, but at last they came to drink in their turn.

The old woman bent over the clear stream, and Nadia, plunging in her hand, carried it to Marfa's lips. Then she refreshed herself. They found new life in these welcome waters. Suddenly Nadia started up; an involuntary cry escaped her.

Michael Strogoff was there, a few steps from her. It was he. The dying rays of the sun fell upon him.

At Nadia's cry Michael started. But he had sufficient command over himself not to utter a word by which he might have been compromised. And yet, when he saw Nadia, he also recognized his mother.

Feeling he could not long keep master of himself at this unexpected meeting, he covered his eyes with his hands and walked quickly away.

Nadia's impulse was to run after him, but the old Siberian murmured in

her ear, "Stay, my daughter!"

"It is he!" replied Nadia, choking with emotion. "He lives, mother! It is he!"

"It is my son," answered Marfa, "it is Michael Strogoff, and you see that I do not make a step towards him! Imitate me, my daughter."

Michael had just experienced the most violent emotion which a man can feel. His mother and Nadia were there!

The two prisoners who were always together in his heart, God had brought them together in this common misfortune. Did Nadia know who he was? Yes, for he had seen Marfa's gesture, holding her back as she was about to rush towards him. Marfa, then, had understood all, and kept his secret.

During that night, Michael was twenty times on the point of looking for and joining his mother; but he knew that he must resist the longing he felt to take her in his arms, and once more press the hand of his young companion. The least imprudence might be fatal. He had besides sworn not to see his mother. Once at Tomsk, since he could not escape this very night, he would set off without having even embraced the two beings in whom all the happiness of his life was centered, and whom he should leave exposed to so many perils.

Michael hoped that this fresh meeting at the Zabediero camp would have

no disastrous consequences either to his mother or to himself. But he did not know that part of this scene, although it passed so rapidly, had been observed by Sangarre, Ogareff's spy.

The Tsigane was there, a few paces off, on the bank, as usual, watching the old Siberian woman. She had not caught sight of Michael, for he disappeared before she had time to look around; but the mother's gesture as she kept back Nadia had not escaped her, and the look in Marfa's eyes told her all.

It was now beyond doubt that Marfa Strogoff's son, the Czar's courier, was at this moment in Zabediero, among Ivan Ogareff's prisoners. Sangarre did not know him, but she knew that he was there. She did not then attempt to discover him, for it would have been impossible in the dark and the immense crowd.

As for again watching Nadia and Marfa Strogoff, that was equally useless. It was evident that the two women would keep on their guard, and it would be impossible to overhear anything of a nature to compromise the courier of the Czar. The Tsigane's first thought was to tell Ivan Ogareff. She therefore immediately left the encampment. A quarter of an hour after, she reached Zabediero, and was shown into the house occupied by the Emir's lieutenant. Ogareff received the Tsigane directly.

"What have you to tell me, Sangarre?" he asked.

"Marfa Strogoff's son is in the encampment."

"A prisoner?"

"A prisoner."

"Ah!" exclaimed Ogareff, "I shall know--"

"You will know nothing, Ivan," replied Tsigane; "for you do not even know him by sight."

"But you know him; you have seen him, Sangarre?"

"I have not seen him; but his mother betrayed herself by a gesture, which told me everything."

"Are you not mistaken?"

"I am not mistaken."

"You know the importance which I attach to the apprehension of this courier," said Ivan Ogareff. "If the letter which he has brought from Moscow reaches Irkutsk, if it is given to the Grand Duke, the Grand Duke will be on his guard, and I shall not be able to get at him. I must have that letter at any price. Now you come to tell me that the bearer of

this letter is in my power. I repeat, Sangarre, are you not mistaken?"

Ogareff spoke with great animation. His emotion showed the extreme importance he attached to the possession of this letter. Sangarre was not at all put out by the urgency with which Ogareff repeated his question. "I am not mistaken, Ivan," she said.

"But, Sangarre, there are thousands of prisoners; and you say that you do not know Michael Strogoff."

"No," answered the Tsigane, with a look of savage joy, "I do not know him; but his mother knows him. Ivan, we must make his mother speak."

"To-morrow she shall speak!" cried Ogareff. So saying, he extended his hand to the Tsigane, who kissed it; for there is nothing servile in this act of respect, it being usual among the Northern races.

Sangarre returned to the camp. She found out Nadia and Marfa Strogoff, and passed the night in watching them. Although worn out with fatigue, the old woman and the girl did not sleep. Their great anxiety kept them awake. Michael was living, but a prisoner. Did Ogareff know him, or would he not soon find him out? Nadia was occupied by the one thought that he whom she had thought dead still lived. But Marfa saw further into the future: and, although she did not care what became of herself, she had every reason to fear for her son.

Sangarre, under cover of the night, had crept near the two women, and remained there several hours listening. She heard nothing. From an instinctive feeling of prudence not a word was exchanged between Nadia and Marfa Strogoff. The next day, the 16th of August, about ten in the morning, trumpet-calls resounded throughout the encampment. The Tartar soldiers were almost immediately under arms.

Ivan Ogareff arrived, surrounded by a large staff of Tartar officers.
His face was more clouded than usual, and his knitted brow gave signs of latent wrath which was waiting for an occasion to break forth.

Michael Strogoff, hidden in a group of prisoners, saw this man pass. He had a presentiment that some catastrophe was imminent: for Ivan Ogareff knew now that Marfa was the mother of Michael Strogoff.

Ogareff dismounted, and his escort cleared a large circle round him.
Just then Sangarre approached him, and said, "I have no news."

Ivan Ogareff's only reply was to give an order to one of his officers.
Then the ranks of prisoners were brutally hurried up by the soldiers.
The unfortunate people, driven on with whips, or pushed on with lances, arranged themselves round the camp. A strong guard of soldiers drawn up behind, rendered escape impossible.

Silence then ensued, and, on a sign from Ivan Ogareff, Sangarre advanced towards the group, in the midst of which stood Marfa.

The old Siberian saw her, and knew what was going to happen. A scornful smile passed over her face. Then leaning towards Nadia, she said in a low tone, "You know me no longer, my daughter. Whatever may happen, and however hard this trial may be, not a word, not a sign. It concerns him, and not me."

At that moment Sangarre, having regarded her for an instant, put her hand on her shoulder.

"What do you want with me?" said Marfa.

"Come!" replied Sangarre, and pushing the old Siberian before her, she took her to Ivan Ogareff, in the middle of the cleared ground. Michael cast down his eyes that their angry flashings might not appear.

Marfa, standing before Ivan Ogareff, drew herself up, crossed her arms on her breast, and waited.

"You are Marfa Strogoff?" asked Ogareff.

"Yes," replied the old Siberian calmly.

"Do you retract what you said to me when, three days ago, I interrogated you at Omsk?"

"No!"

"Then you do not know that your son, Michael Strogoff, courier of the Czar, has passed through Omsk?"

"I do not know it."

"And the man in whom you thought you recognized your son, was not he your son?"

"He was not my son."

"And since then you have not seen him amongst the prisoners?"

"No."

"If he were pointed out, would you recognize him?"

"No."

On this reply, which showed such determined resolution, a murmur was heard amongst the crowd.

Ogareff could not restrain a threatening gesture.

"Listen," said he to Marfa, "your son is here, and you shall immediately

point him out to me."

"No."

"All these men, taken at Omsk and Kolyvan, will defile before you; and if you do not show me Michael Strogoff, you shall receive as many blows of the knout as men shall have passed before you."

Ivan Ogareff saw that, whatever might be his threats, whatever might be the tortures to which he submitted her, the indomitable Siberian would not speak. To discover the courier of the Czar, he counted, then, not on her, but on Michael himself. He did not believe it possible that, when mother and son were in each other's presence, some involuntary movement would not betray him. Of course, had he wished to seize the imperial letter, he would simply have given orders to search all the prisoners; but Michael might have destroyed the letter, having learnt its contents; and if he were not recognized, if he were to reach Irkutsk, all Ivan Ogareff's plans would be baffled. It was thus not only the letter which the traitor must have, but the bearer himself.

Nadia had heard all, and she now knew who was Michael Strogoff, and why he had wished to cross, without being recognized, the invaded provinces of Siberia.

On an order from Ivan Ogareff the prisoners defiled, one by one, past Marfa, who remained immovable as a statue, and whose face expressed only

perfect indifference.

Her son was among the last. When in his turn he passed before his mother, Nadia shut her eyes that she might not see him. Michael was to all appearance unmoved, but the palm of his hand bled under his nails, which were pressed into them.

Ivan Ogareff was baffled by mother and son.

Sangarre, close to him, said one word, "The knout!"

"Yes," cried Ogareff, who could no longer restrain himself; "the knout for this wretched old woman--the knout to the death!"

A Tartar soldier bearing this terrible instrument of torture approached Marfa. The knout is composed of a certain number of leathern thongs, at the end of which are attached pieces of twisted iron wire. It is reckoned that a sentence to one hundred and twenty blows of this whip is equivalent to a sentence of death.

Marfa knew it, but she knew also that no torture would make her speak. She was sacrificing her life.

Marfa, seized by two soldiers, was forced on her knees on the ground. Her dress torn off left her back bare. A saber was placed before her breast, at a few inches' distance only. Directly she bent beneath her

suffering, her breast would be pierced by the sharp steel.

The Tartar drew himself up. He waited. "Begin!" said Ogareff. The whip whistled in the air.

But before it fell a powerful hand stopped the Tartar's arm. Michael was there. He had leapt forward at this horrible scene. If at the relay at Ichim he had restrained himself when Ogareff's whip had struck him, here before his mother, who was about to be struck, he could not do so. Ivan Ogareff had succeeded.

"Michael Strogoff!" cried he. Then advancing, "Ah, the man of Ichim?"

"Himself!" said Michael. And raising the knout he struck Ogareff a sharp blow across the face. "Blow for blow!" said he.

"Well repaid!" cried a voice concealed by the tumult.

Twenty soldiers threw themselves on Michael, and in another instant he would have been slain.

But Ogareff, who on being struck had uttered a cry of rage and pain, stopped them. "This man is reserved for the Emir's judgment," said he. "Search him!"

The letter with the imperial arms was found in Michael's bosom; he had

not had time to destroy it; it was handed to Ogareff.

The voice which had pronounced the words, "Well repaid!" was that of no other than Alcide Jolivet. "Par-dieu!" said he to Blount, "they are rough, these people. Acknowledge that we owe our traveling companion a good turn. Korpanoff or Strogoff is worthy of it. Oh, that was fine retaliation for the little affair at Ichim."

"Yes, retaliation truly," replied Blount; "but Strogoff is a dead man. I suspect that, for his own interest at all events, it would have been better had he not possessed quite so lively a recollection of the event."

"And let his mother perish under the knout?"

"Do you think that either she or his sister will be a bit better off from this outbreak of his?"

"I do not know or think anything except that I should have done much the same in his position," replied Alcide. "What a scar the Colonel has received! Bah! one must boil over sometimes. We should have had water in our veins instead of blood had it been incumbent on us to be always and everywhere unmoved to wrath."

"A neat little incident for our journals," observed Blount, "if only Ivan Ogareff would let us know the contents of that letter."

Ivan Ogareff, when he had stanched the blood which was trickling down his face, had broken the seal. He read and re-read the letter deliberately, as if he was determined to discover everything it contained.

Then having ordered that Michael, carefully bound and guarded, should be carried on to Tomsk with the other prisoners, he took command of the troops at Zabediero, and, amid the deafening noise of drums and trumpets, he marched towards the town where the Emir awaited him.

CHAPTER IV THE TRIUMPHAL ENTRY

TOMSK, founded in 1604, nearly in the heart of the Siberian provinces, is one of the most important towns in Asiatic Russia. Tobolsk, situated above the sixtieth parallel; Irkutsk, built beyond the hundredth meridian--have seen Tomsk increase at their expense.

And yet Tomsk, as has been said, is not the capital of this important province. It is at Omsk that the Governor-General of the province and the official world reside. But Tomsk is the most considerable town of that territory. The country being rich, the town is so likewise, for it is in the center of fruitful mines. In the luxury of its houses, its arrangements, and its equipages, it might rival the greatest European capitals. It is a city of millionaires, enriched by the spade and pickax, and though it has not the honor of being the residence of the Czar's representative, it can boast of including in the first rank of its notables the chief of the merchants of the town, the principal grantees of the imperial government's mines.

But the millionaires were fled now, and except for the crouching poor, the town stood empty to the hordes of Feofar-Khan. At four o'clock the Emir made his entry into the square, greeted by a flourish of trumpets, the rolling sound of the big drums, salvoes of artillery and musketry.

Feofar mounted his favorite horse, which carried on its head an aigrette of diamonds. The Emir still wore his uniform. He was accompanied by

a numerous staff, and beside him walked the Khans of Khokhand and Koundouge and the grand dignitaries of the Khanats.

At the same moment appeared on the terrace the chief of Feofar's wives, the queen, if this title may be given to the sultana of the states of Bokhara. But, queen or slave, this woman of Persian origin was wonderfully beautiful. Contrary to the Mahometan custom, and no doubt by some caprice of the Emir, she had her face uncovered. Her hair, divided into four plaits, fell over her dazzling white shoulders, scarcely concealed by a veil of silk worked in gold, which fell from the back of a cap studded with gems of the highest value. Under her blue-silk petticoat, fell the "zirdjameh" of silken gauze, and above the sash lay the "pirahn." But from the head to the little feet, such was the profusion of jewels--gold beads strung on silver threads, chaplets of turquoises, "firouzehs" from the celebrated mines of Elbourz, necklaces of cornelians, agates, emeralds, opals, and sapphires--that her dress seemed to be literally made of precious stones. The thousands of diamonds which sparkled on her neck, arms, hands, at her waist, and at her feet might have been valued at almost countless millions of roubles.

The Emir and the Khans dismounted, as did the dignitaries who escorted them. All entered a magnificent tent erected on the center of the first terrace. Before the tent, as usual, the Koran was laid.

Feofar's lieutenant did not make them wait, and before five o'clock the trumpets announced his arrival. Ivan Ogareff--the Scarred Cheek, as

he was already nick-named--wearing the uniform of a Tartar officer, dismounted before the Emir's tent. He was accompanied by a party of soldiers from the camp at Zabediero, who ranged up at the sides of the square, in the middle of which a place for the sports was reserved. A large scar could be distinctly seen cut obliquely across the traitor's face.

Ogareff presented his principal officers to the Emir, who, without departing from the coldness which composed the main part of his dignity, received them in a way which satisfied them that they stood well in the good graces of their chief.

At least so thought Harry Blount and Alcide Jolivet, the two inseparables, now associated together in the chase after news. After leaving Zabediero, they had proceeded rapidly to Tomsk. The plan they had agreed upon was to leave the Tartars as soon as possible, and to join a Russian regiment, and, if they could, to go with them to Irkutsk. All that they had seen of the invasion, its burnings, its pillages, its murders, had perfectly sickened them, and they longed to be among the ranks of the Siberian army. Jolivet had told his companion that he could not leave Tomsk without making a sketch of the triumphal entry of the Tartar troops, if it was only to satisfy his cousin's curiosity; but the same evening they both intended to take the road to Irkutsk, and being well mounted hoped to distance the Emir's scouts.

Alcide and Blount mingled therefore in the crowd, so as to lose no

detail of a festival which ought to supply them with a hundred good lines for an article. They admired the magnificence of Feofar-Khan, his wives, his officers, his guards, and all the Eastern pomp, of which the ceremonies of Europe can give not the least idea. But they turned away with disgust when Ivan Ogareff presented himself before the Emir, and waited with some impatience for the amusements to begin.

"You see, my dear Blount," said Alcide, "we have come too soon, like honest citizens who like to get their money's worth. All this is before the curtain rises, it would have been better to arrive only for the ballet."

"What ballet?" asked Blount.

"The compulsory ballet, to be sure. But see, the curtain is going to rise." Alcide Jolivet spoke as if he had been at the Opera, and taking his glass from its case, he prepared, with the air of a connoisseur, "to examine the first act of Feofar's company."

A painful ceremony was to precede the sports. In fact, the triumph of the vanquisher could not be complete without the public humiliation of the vanquished. This was why several hundreds of prisoners were brought under the soldiers' whips. They were destined to march past Feofar-Khan and his allies before being crammed with their companions into the prisons in the town.

In the first ranks of these prisoners figured Michael Strogoff. As Ogareff had ordered, he was specially guarded by a file of soldiers. His mother and Nadia were there also.

The old Siberian, although energetic enough when her own safety was in question, was frightfully pale. She expected some terrible scene. It was not without reason that her son had been brought before the Emir. She therefore trembled for him. Ivan Ogareff was not a man to forgive having been struck in public by the knout, and his vengeance would be merciless. Some frightful punishment familiar to the barbarians of Central Asia would, no doubt, be inflicted on Michael Ogareff had protected him against the soldiers because he well knew what would happen by reserving him for the justice of the Emir.

The mother and son had not been able to speak together since the terrible scene in the camp at Zabediero. They had been pitilessly kept apart--a bitter aggravation of their misery, for it would have been some consolation to have been together during these days of captivity. Marfa longed to ask her son's pardon for the harm she had unintentionally done him, for she reproached herself with not having commanded her maternal feelings. If she had restrained herself in that post-house at Omsk, when she found herself face to face with him, Michael would have passed unrecognized, and all these misfortunes would have been avoided.

Michael, on his side, thought that if his mother was there, if Ogareff had brought her with him, it was to make her suffer with the sight of

his own punishment, or perhaps some frightful death was reserved for her also.

As to Nadia, she only asked herself how she could save them both, how come to the aid of son and mother. As yet she could only wonder, but she felt instinctively that she must above everything avoid drawing attention upon herself, that she must conceal herself, make herself insignificant. Perhaps she might at least gnaw through the meshes which imprisoned the lion. At any rate if any opportunity was given her she would seize upon it, and sacrifice herself, if need be, for the son of Marfa Strogoff.

In the meantime the greater part of the prisoners were passing before the Emir, and as they passed each was obliged to prostrate himself, with his forehead in the dust, in token of servitude. Slavery begins by humiliation. When the unfortunate people were too slow in bending, the rough guards threw them violently to the ground.

Alcide Jolivet and his companion could not witness such a sight without feeling indignant.

"It is cowardly--let us go," said Alcide.

"No," answered Blount; "we must see it all."

"See it all!--ah!" cried Alcide, suddenly, grasping his companion's arm.

"What is the matter with you?" asked the latter.

"Look, Blount; it is she!"

"What she?"

"The sister of our traveling companion--alone, and a prisoner! We must save her."

"Calm yourself," replied Blount coolly. "Any interference on our part in behalf of the young girl would be worse than useless."

Alcide Jolivet, who had been about to rush forward, stopped, and Nadia--who had not perceived them, her features being half hidden by her hair--passed in her turn before the Emir without attracting his attention.

However, after Nadia came Marfa Strogoff; and as she did not throw herself quickly in the dust, the guards brutally pushed her. She fell.

Her son struggled so violently that the soldiers who were guarding him could scarcely hold him back. But the old woman rose, and they were about to drag her on, when Ogareff interposed, saying, "Let that woman stay!"

As to Nadia, she happily regained the crowd of prisoners. Ivan Ogareff had taken no notice of her.

Michael was then led before the Emir, and there he remained standing, without casting down his eyes.

"Your forehead to the ground!" cried Ogareff.

"No!" answered Michael.

Two soldiers endeavored to make him bend, but they were themselves laid on the ground by a buffet from the young man's fist.

Ogareff approached Michael. "You shall die!" he said.

"I can die," answered Michael fiercely; "but your traitor's face, Ivan, will not the less carry forever the infamous brand of the knout."

At this reply Ivan Ogareff became perfectly livid.

"Who is this prisoner?" asked the Emir, in a tone of voice terrible from its very calmness.

"A Russian spy," answered Ogareff. In asserting that Michael was a spy he knew that the sentence pronounced against him would be terrible.

The Emir made a sign at which all the crowd bent low their heads. Then he pointed with his hand to the Koran, which was brought him. He opened the sacred book and placed his finger on one of its pages.

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

The Emir had let his finger rest on the page of the Koran. The chief of the Ulemas then approached, and read in a loud voice a verse which ended with these words, "And he will no more see the things of this earth."

"Russian spy!" exclaimed Feofar-Kahn in a voice trembling with fury, "you have come to see what is going on in the Tartar camp. Then look while you may."

CHAPTER V "LOOK WHILE YOU MAY!"

MICHAEL was held before the Emir's throne, at the foot of the terrace, his hands bound behind his back. His mother overcome at last by mental and physical torture, had sunk to the ground, daring neither to look nor listen.

"Look while you may," exclaimed Feofar-Kahn, stretching his arm towards Michael in a threatening manner. Doubtless Ivan Ogareff, being well acquainted with Tartar customs, had taken in the full meaning of these words, for his lips curled for an instant in a cruel smile; he then took his place by Feofar-Khan.

A trumpet call was heard. This was the signal for the amusements to begin. "Here comes the ballet," said Alcide to Blount; "but, contrary to our customs, these barbarians give it before the drama."

Michael had been commanded to look at everything. He looked. A troop of dancers poured into the open space before the Emir's tent. Different Tartar instruments, the "doutare," a long-handled guitar, the "kobize," a kind of violoncello, the "tschibyzga," a long reed flute; wind instruments, tom-toms, tambourines, united with the deep voices of the singers, formed a strange harmony. Added to this were the strains of an aerial orchestra, composed of a dozen kites, which, fastened by strings to their centers, resounded in the breeze like AEolian harps.

Then the dancers began. The performers were all of Persian origin; they were no longer slaves, but exercised their profession at liberty. Formerly they figured officially in the ceremonies at the court of Teheran, but since the accession of the reigning family, banished or treated with contempt, they had been compelled to seek their fortune elsewhere. They wore the national costume, and were adorned with a profusion of jewels. Little triangles of gold, studded with jewels, glittered in their ears. Circles of silver, marked with black, surrounded their necks and legs.

These performers gracefully executed various dances, sometimes alone, sometimes in groups. Their faces were uncovered, but from time to time they threw a light veil over their heads, and a gauze cloud passed over their bright eyes as smoke over a starry sky. Some of these Persians wore leathern belts embroidered with pearls, from which hung little triangular bags. From these bags, embroidered with golden filigree, they drew long narrow bands of scarlet silk, on which were braided verses of the Koran. These bands, which they held between them, formed a belt under which the other dancers darted; and, as they passed each verse, following the precept it contained, they either prostrated themselves on the earth or lightly bounded upwards, as though to take a place among the houris of Mohammed's heaven.

But what was remarkable, and what struck Alcide, was that the Persians appeared rather indolent than fiery. Their passion had deserted them, and, by the kind of dances as well as by their execution, they recalled

rather the calm and self-possessed nauch girls of India than the impassioned dancers of Egypt.

When this was over, a stern voice was heard saying:

"Look while you may!"

The man who repeated the Emir's words--a tall spare Tartar--was he who carried out the sentences of Feofar-Khan against offenders. He had taken his place behind Michael, holding in his hand a broad curved saber, one of those Damascene blades which are forged by the celebrated armorers of Karschi or Hissar.

Behind him guards were carrying a tripod supporting a chafing-dish filled with live coals. No smoke arose from this, but a light vapor surrounded it, due to the incineration of a certain aromatic and resinous substance which he had thrown on the surface.

The Persians were succeeded by another party of dancers, whom Michael recognized. The journalists also appeared to recognize them, for Blount said to his companion, "These are the Tsiganes of Nijni-Novgorod."

"No doubt of it," cried Alcide. "Their eyes, I imagine, bring more money to these spies than their legs."

In putting them down as agents in the Emir's service, Alcide Jolivet

was, by all accounts, not mistaken.

In the first rank of the Tsiganes, Sangarre appeared, superb in her strange and picturesque costume, which set off still further her remarkable beauty.

Sangarre did not dance, but she stood as a statue in the midst of the performers, whose style of dancing was a combination of that of all those countries through which their race had passed--Turkey, Bohemia, Egypt, Italy, and Spain. They were enlivened by the sound of cymbals, which clashed on their arms, and by the hollow sounds of the "daires"--a sort of tambourine played with the fingers.

Sangarre, holding one of those daires, which she played between her hands, encouraged this troupe of veritable corybantes. A young Tsigane, of about fifteen years of age, then advanced. He held in his hand a "doutare," strings of which he made to vibrate by a simple movement of the nails. He sung. During the singing of each couplet, of very peculiar rhythm, a dancer took her position by him and remained there immovable, listening to him, but each time that the burden came from the lips of the young singer, she resumed her dance, dinning in his ears with her daire, and deafening him with the clashing of her cymbals. Then, after the last chorus, the remainder surrounded the Tsigane in the windings of their dance.

At that moment a shower of gold fell from the hands of the Emir and his

train, and from the hands of his officers of all ranks; to the noise which the pieces made as they struck the cymbals of the dancers, being added the last murmurs of the doutares and tambourines.

"Lavish as robbers," said Alcide in the ear of his companion. And in fact it was the result of plunder which was falling; for, with the Tartar tomans and sequins, rained also Russian ducats and roubles.

Then silence followed for an instant, and the voice of the executioner, who laid his hand on Michael's shoulder, once more pronounced the words, which this repetition rendered more and more sinister:

"Look while you may"

But this time Alcide observed that the executioner no longer held the saber bare in his hand.

Meanwhile the sun had sunk behind the horizon. A semi-obscurity began to envelop the plain. The mass of cedars and pines became blacker and blacker, and the waters of the Tom, totally obscured in the distance, mingled with the approaching shadows.

But at that instant several hundreds of slaves, bearing lighted torches, entered the square. Led by Sangarre, Tsiganes and Persians reappeared before the Emir's throne, and showed off, by the contrast, their dances of styles so different. The instruments of the Tartar orchestra sounded

forth in harmony still more savage, accompanied by the guttural cries of the singers. The kites, which had fallen to the ground, once more winged their way into the sky, each bearing a parti-colored lantern, and under a fresher breeze their harps vibrated with intenser sound in the midst of the aerial illumination.

Then a squadron of Tartars, in their brilliant uniforms, mingled in the dances, whose wild fury was increasing rapidly, and then began a performance which produced a very strange effect. Soldiers came on the ground, armed with bare sabers and long pistols, and, as they executed dances, they made the air re-echo with the sudden detonations of their firearms, which immediately set going the rumbling of the tambourines, and grumblings of the daires, and the gnashing of doutares.

Their arms, covered with a colored powder of some metallic ingredient, after the Chinese fashion, threw long jets--red, green, and blue--so that the groups of dancers seemed to be in the midst of fireworks. In some respects, this performance recalled the military dance of the ancients, in the midst of naked swords; but this Tartar dance was rendered yet more fantastic by the colored fire, which wound, serpent-like, above the dancers, whose dresses seemed to be embroidered with fiery hems. It was like a kaleidoscope of sparks, whose infinite combinations varied at each movement of the dancers.

Though it may be thought that a Parisian reporter would be perfectly hardened to any scenic effect, which our modern ideas have carried so

far, yet Alcide Jolivet could not restrain a slight movement of the head, which at home, between the Boulevard Montmartre and La Madeleine would have said--"Very fair, very fair."

Then, suddenly, at a signal, all the lights of the fantasia were extinguished, the dances ceased, and the performers disappeared. The ceremony was over, and the torches alone lighted up the plateau, which a few instants before had been so brilliantly illuminated.

On a sign from the Emir, Michael was led into the middle of the square.

"Blount," said Alcide to his companion, "are you going to see the end of all this?"

"No, that I am not," replied Blount.

"The readers of the Daily Telegraph are, I hope, not very eager for the details of an execution a la mode Tartare?"

"No more than your cousin!"

"Poor fellow!" added Alcide, as he watched Michael. "That valiant soldier should have fallen on the field of battle!"

"Can we do nothing to save him?" said Blount.

"Nothing!"

The reporters recalled Michael's generous conduct towards them; they knew now through what trials he must have passed, ever obedient to his duty; and in the midst of these Tartars, to whom pity is unknown, they could do nothing for him. Having little desire to be present at the torture reserved for the unfortunate man, they returned to the town. An hour later, they were on the road to Irkutsk, for it was among the Russians that they intended to follow what Alcide called, by anticipation, "the campaign of revenge."

Meantime, Michael was standing ready, his eyes returning the Emir's haughty glance, while his countenance assumed an expression of intense scorn whenever he cast his looks on Ivan Ogareff. He was prepared to die, yet not a single sign of weakness escaped him.

The spectators, waiting around the square, as well as Feofar-Khan's body-guard, to whom this execution was only one of the attractions, were eagerly expecting it. Then, their curiosity satisfied, they would rush off to enjoy the pleasures of intoxication.

The Emir made a sign. Michael was thrust forward by his guards to the foot of the terrace, and Feofar said to him, "You came to see our goings out and comings in, Russian spy. You have seen for the last time. In an instant your eyes will be forever shut to the day."

Michael's fate was to be not death, but blindness; loss of sight, more terrible perhaps than loss of life. The unhappy man was condemned to be blinded.

However, on hearing the Emir's sentence Michael's heart did not grow faint. He remained unmoved, his eyes wide open, as though he wished to concentrate his whole life into one last look. To entreat pity from these savage men would be useless, besides, it would be unworthy of him. He did not even think of it. His thoughts were condensed on his mission, which had apparently so completely failed; on his mother, on Nadia, whom he should never more see! But he let no sign appear of the emotion he felt. Then, a feeling of vengeance to be accomplished came over him. "Ivan," said he, in a stern voice, "Ivan the Traitor, the last menace of my eyes shall be for you!"

Ivan Ogareff shrugged his shoulders.

But Michael was not to be looking at Ivan when his eyes were put out. Marfa Strogoff stood before him.

"My mother!" cried he. "Yes! yes! my last glance shall be for you, and not for this wretch! Stay there, before me! Now I see once more your well-beloved face! Now shall my eyes close as they rest upon it...!"

The old woman, without uttering a word, advanced.

"Take that woman away!" said Ivan.

Two soldiers were about to seize her, but she stepped back and remained standing a few paces from Michael.

The executioner appeared. This time, he held his saber bare in his hand, and this saber he had just drawn from the chafing-dish, where he had brought it to a white heat. Michael was going to be blinded in the Tartar fashion, with a hot blade passed before his eyes!

Michael did not attempt to resist. Nothing existed before his eyes but his mother, whom his eyes seemed to devour. All his life was in that last look.

Marfa Strogoff, her eyes open wide, her arms extended towards where he stood, was gazing at him. The incandescent blade passed before Michael's eyes.

A despairing cry was heard. His aged mother fell senseless to the ground. Michael Strogoff was blind.

His orders executed, the Emir retired with his train. There remained in the square only Ivan Ogareff and the torch bearers. Did the wretch intend to insult his victim yet further, and yet to give him a parting blow?

Ivan Ogareff slowly approached Michael, who, feeling him coming, drew himself up. Ivan drew from his pocket the Imperial letter, he opened it, and with supreme irony he held it up before the sightless eyes of the Czar's courier, saying, "Read, now, Michael Strogoff, read, and go and repeat at Irkutsk what you have read. The true Courier of the Czar is Ivan Ogareff."

This said, the traitor thrust the letter into his breast. Then, without looking round he left the square, followed by the torch-bearers.

Michael was left alone, at a few paces from his mother, lying lifeless, perhaps dead. He heard in the distance cries and songs, the varied noises of a wild debauch. Tomsk, illuminated, glittered and gleamed.

Michael listened. The square was silent and deserted. He went, groping his way, towards the place where his mother had fallen. He found her with his hand, he bent over her, he put his face close to hers, he listened for the beating of her heart. Then he murmured a few words.

Did Marfa still live, and did she hear her son's words? Whether she did so or not, she made not the slightest movement. Michael kissed her forehead and her white locks. He then raised himself, and, groping with his foot, trying to stretch out his hand to guide himself, he walked by degrees to the edge of the square.

Suddenly Nadia appeared. She walked straight to her companion. A knife

in her hand cut the cords which bound Michael's arms. The blind man knew not who had freed him, for Nadia had not spoken a word.

But this done: "Brother!" said she.

"Nadia!" murmured Michael, "Nadia!"

"Come, brother," replied Nadia, "use my eyes whilst yours sleep. I will lead you to Irkutsk."

CHAPTER VI A FRIEND ON THE HIGHWAY

HALF an hour afterwards, Michael and Nadia had left Tomsk.

Many others of the prisoners were that night able to escape from the Tartars, for officers and soldiers, all more or less intoxicated, had unconsciously relaxed the vigilant guard which they had hitherto maintained. Nadia, after having been carried off with the other prisoners, had been able to escape and return to the square, at the moment when Michael was led before the Emir. There, mingling with the crowd, she had witnessed the terrible scene. Not a cry escaped her when the scorching blade passed before her companion's eyes. She kept, by her strength of will, mute and motionless. A providential inspiration bade her restrain herself and retain her liberty that she might lead Marfa's son to that goal which he had sworn to reach. Her heart for an instant ceased to beat when the aged Siberian woman fell senseless to the ground, but one thought restored her to her former energy. "I will be the blind man's dog," said she.

On Ogareff's departure, Nadia had concealed herself in the shade. She had waited till the crowd left the square. Michael, abandoned as a wretched being from whom nothing was to be feared, was alone. She saw him draw himself towards his mother, bend over her, kiss her forehead, then rise and grope his way in flight.

A few instants later, she and he, hand in hand, had descended the steep

slope, when, after having followed the high banks of the Tom to the furthest extremity of the town, they happily found a breach in the inclosure.

The road to Irkutsk was the only one which penetrated towards the east. It could not be mistaken. It was possible that on the morrow, after some hours of carousal, the scouts of the Emir, once more scattering over the steppes, might cut off all communication. It was of the greatest importance therefore to get in advance of them. How could Nadia bear the fatigues of that night, from the 16th to the 17th of August? How could she have found strength for so long a stage? How could her feet, bleeding under that forced march, have carried her thither? It is almost incomprehensible. But it is none the less true that on the next morning, twelve hours after their departure from Tomsk, Michael and she reached the town of Semilowskoe, after a journey of thirty-five miles.

Michael had not uttered a single word. It was not Nadia who held his hand, it was he who held that of his companion during the whole of that night; but, thanks to that trembling little hand which guided him, he had walked at his ordinary pace.

Semilowskoe was almost entirely abandoned. The inhabitants had fled. Not more than two or three houses were still occupied. All that the town contained, useful or precious, had been carried off in wagons. However, Nadia was obliged to make a halt of a few hours. They both required food and rest.

The young girl led her companion to the extremity of the town. There they found an empty house, the door wide open. An old rickety wooden bench stood in the middle of the room, near the high stove which is to be found in all Siberian houses. They silently seated themselves.

Nadia gazed in her companion's face as she had never before gazed. There was more than gratitude, more than pity, in that look. Could Michael have seen her, he would have read in that sweet desolate gaze a world of devotion and tenderness.

The eyelids of the blind man, made red by the heated blade, fell half over his eyes. The pupils seemed to be singularly enlarged. The rich blue of the iris was darker than formerly. The eyelashes and eyebrows were partly burnt, but in appearance, at least, the old penetrating look appeared to have undergone no change. If he could no longer see, if his blindness was complete, it was because the sensibility of the retina and optic nerve was radically destroyed by the fierce heat of the steel.

Then Michael stretched out his hands.

"Are you there, Nadia?" he asked.

"Yes," replied the young girl; "I am close to you, and I will not go away from you, Michael."

At his name, pronounced by Nadia for the first time, a thrill passed through Michael's frame. He perceived that his companion knew all, who he was.

"Nadia," replied he, "we must separate!"

"We separate? How so, Michael?"

"I must not be an obstacle to your journey! Your father is waiting for you at Irkutsk! You must rejoin your father!"

"My father would curse me, Michael, were I to abandon you now, after all you have done for me!"

"Nadia, Nadia," replied Michael, "you should think only of your father!"

"Michael," replied Nadia, "you have more need of me than my father. Do you mean to give up going to Irkutsk?"

"Never!" cried Michael, in a tone which plainly showed that none of his energy was gone.

"But you have not the letter!"

"That letter of which Ivan Ogareff robbed me! Well! I shall manage without it, Nadia! They have treated me as a spy! I will act as a spy! I

will go and repeat at Irkutsk all I have seen, all I have heard; I swear it by Heaven above! The traitor shall meet me one day face to face! But I must arrive at Irkutsk before him."

"And yet you speak of our separating, Michael?"

"Nadia, they have taken everything from me!"

"I have some roubles still, and my eyes! I can see for you, Michael; and I will lead you thither, where you could not go alone!"

"And how shall we go?"

"On foot."

"And how shall we live?"

"By begging."

"Let us start, Nadia."

"Come, Michael."

The two young people no longer kept the names "brother" and "sister." In their common misfortune, they felt still closer united. They left the house after an hour's repose. Nadia had procured in the town some

morsels of "tchornekhleb," a sort of barley bread, and a little mead, called "meod" in Russia. This had cost her nothing, for she had already begun her plan of begging. The bread and mead had in some degree appeased Michael's hunger and thirst. Nadia gave him the lion's share of this scanty meal. He ate the pieces of bread his companion gave him, drank from the gourd she held to his lips.

"Are you eating, Nadia?" he asked several times.

"Yes, Michael," invariably replied the young girl, who contented herself with what her companion left.

Michael and Nadia quitted Semilowskoe, and once more set out on the laborious road to Irkutsk. The girl bore up in a marvelous way against fatigue. Had Michael seen her, perhaps he would not have had the courage to go on. But Nadia never complained, and Michael, hearing no sigh, walked at a speed he was unable to repress. And why? Did he still expect to keep before the Tartars? He was on foot, without money; he was blind, and if Nadia, his only guide, were to be separated from him, he could only lie down by the side of the road and there perish miserably.
But if, on the other hand, by energetic perseverance he could reach Krasnoiarsk, all was perhaps not lost, since the governor, to whom he would make himself known, would not hesitate to give him the means of reaching Irkutsk.

Michael walked on, speaking little, absorbed in his own thoughts. He

held Nadia's hand. The two were in incessant communication. It seemed to them that they had no need of words to exchange their thoughts. From time to time Michael said, "Speak to me, Nadia."

"Why should I, Michael? We are thinking together!" the young girl would reply, and contrived that her voice should not betray her extreme fatigue.

But sometimes, as if her heart had ceased to beat for an instant, her limbs tottered, her steps flagged, her arms fell to her sides, she dropped behind. Michael then stopped, he fixed his eyes on the poor girl, as though he would try to pierce the gloom which surrounded him; his breast heaved; then, supporting his companion more than before, he started on afresh.

However, amidst these continual miseries, a fortunate circumstance on that day occurred which it appeared likely would considerably ease their fatigue. They had been walking from Semilowskoe for two hours when Michael stopped.

"Is there no one on the road?"

"Not a single soul," replied Nadia.

"Do you not hear some noise behind us? If they are Tartars we must hide. Keep a good look-out!"

"Wait, Michael!" replied Nadia, going back a few steps to where the road turned to the right.

Michael Strogoff waited alone for a minute, listening attentively.

Nadia returned almost immediately and said, "It is a cart. A young man is leading it."

"Is he alone?"

"Alone."

Michael hesitated an instant. Should he hide? or should he, on the contrary, try to find a place in the vehicle, if not for himself, at least for her? For himself, he would be quite content to lay one hand on the cart, to push it if necessary, for his legs showed no sign of failing him; but he felt sure that Nadia, compelled to walk ever since they crossed the Obi, that is, for eight days, must be almost exhausted. He waited.

The cart was soon at the corner of the road. It was a very dilapidated vehicle, known in the country as a kibitka, just capable of holding three persons. Usually the kibitka is drawn by three horses, but this had but one, a beast with long hair and a very long tail. It was of the Mongol breed, known for strength and courage.

A young man was leading it, with a dog beside him. Nadia saw at once that the young man was Russian; his face was phlegmatic, but pleasant, and at once inspired confidence. He did not appear to be in the slightest hurry; he was not walking fast that he might spare his horse, and, to look at him, it would not have been believed that he was following a road which might at any instant be swarming with Tartars.

Nadia, holding Michael by the hand, made way for the vehicle. The kibitka stopped, and the driver smilingly looked at the young girl.

"And where are you going to in this fashion?" he asked, opening wide his great honest eyes.

At the sound of his voice, Michael said to himself that he had heard it before. And it was satisfactory to him to recognize the man for his brow at once cleared.

"Well, where are you going?" repeated the young man, addressing himself more directly to Michael.

"We are going to Irkutsk," he replied.

"Oh! little father, you do not know that there are still versts and versts between you and Irkutsk?"

"I know it."

"And you are going on foot?"

"On foot."

"You, well! but the young lady?"

"She is my sister," said Michael, who judged it prudent to give again this name to Nadia.

"Yes, your sister, little father! But, believe me, she will never be able to get to Irkutsk!"

"Friend," returned Michael, approaching him, "the Tartars have robbed us of everything, and I have not a copeck to offer you; but if you will take my sister with you, I will follow your cart on foot; I will run when necessary, I will not delay you an hour!"

"Brother," exclaimed Nadia, "I will not! I will not! Sir, my brother is blind!"

"Blind!" repeated the young man, much moved.

"The Tartars have burnt out his eyes!" replied Nadia, extending her hands, as if imploring pity.

"Burnt out his eyes! Oh! poor little father! I am going to Krasnoiarsk. Well, why should not you and your sister mount in the kibitka? By sitting a little close, it will hold us all three. Besides, my dog will not refuse to go on foot; only I don't go fast, I spare my horse."

"Friend, what is your name?" asked Michael.

"My name is Nicholas Pigassof."

"It is a name that I will never forget," said Michael.

"Well, jump up, little blind father. Your sister will be beside you, in the bottom of the cart; I sit in front to drive. There is plenty of good birch bark and straw in the bottom; it's like a nest. Serko, make room!"

The dog jumped down without more telling. He was an animal of the Siberian race, gray hair, of medium size, with an honest big head, just made to pat, and he, moreover, appeared to be much attached to his master.

In a moment more, Michael and Nadia were seated in the kibitka. Michael held out his hands as if to feel for those of Pigassof. "You wish to shake my hands!" said Nicholas. "There they are, little father! shake them as long as it will give you any pleasure."

The kibitka moved on; the horse, which Nicholas never touched with the whip, ambled along. Though Michael did not gain any in speed, at least some fatigue was spared to Nadia.

Such was the exhaustion of the young girl, that, rocked by the monotonous movement of the kibitka, she soon fell into a sleep, its soundness proving her complete prostration. Michael and Nicholas laid her on the straw as comfortably as possible. The compassionate young man was greatly moved, and if a tear did not escape from Michael's eyes, it was because the red-hot iron had dried up the last!

"She is very pretty," said Nicholas.

"Yes," replied Michael.

"They try to be strong, little father, they are brave, but they are weak after all, these dear little things! Have you come from far."

"Very far."

"Poor young people! It must have hurt you very much when they burnt your eyes!"

"Very much," answered Michael, turning towards Nicholas as if he could see him.

"Did you not weep?"

"Yes."

"I should have wept too. To think that one could never again see those one loves. But they can see you, however; that's perhaps some consolation!"

"Yes, perhaps. Tell me, my friend," continued Michael, "have you never seen me anywhere before?"

"You, little father? No, never."

"The sound of your voice is not unknown to me."

"Why!" returned Nicholas, smiling, "he knows the sound of my voice! Perhaps you ask me that to find out where I come from. I come from Kolyvan."

"From Kolyvan?" repeated Michael. "Then it was there I met you; you were in the telegraph office?"

"That may be," replied Nicholas. "I was stationed there. I was the clerk in charge of the messages."

"And you stayed at your post up to the last moment?"

"Why, it's at that moment one ought to be there!"

"It was the day when an Englishman and a Frenchman were disputing, roubles in hand, for the place at your wicket, and the Englishman telegraphed some poetry."

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

"What! you do not remember it?"

"I never read the dispatches I send. My duty being to forget them, the shortest way is not to know them."

This reply showed Nicholas Pigassof's character. In the meanwhile the kibitka pursued its way, at a pace which Michael longed to render more rapid. But Nicholas and his horse were accustomed to a pace which neither of them would like to alter. The horse went for two hours and rested one--so on, day and night. During the halts the horse grazed, the travelers ate in company with the faithful Serko. The kibitka was provisioned for at least twenty persons, and Nicholas generously placed his supplies at the disposal of his two guests, whom he believed to be brother and sister.

After a day's rest, Nadia recovered some strength. Nicholas took the best possible care of her. The journey was being made under tolerable

circumstances, slowly certainly, but surely. It sometimes happened that during the night, Nicholas, although driving, fell asleep, and snored with a clearness which showed the calmness of his conscience. Perhaps then, by looking close, Michael's hand might have been seen feeling for the reins, and giving the horse a more rapid pace, to the great astonishment of Serko, who, however, said nothing. The trot was exchanged for the amble as soon as Nicholas awoke, but the kibitka had not the less gained some versts.

Thus they passed the river Ichirnsk, the villages of Ichisnokoe, Berikylokoe, Kuskoe, the river Marunsk, the village of the same name, Bogostowskoe, and, lastly, the Ichoula, a little stream which divides Western from Eastern Siberia. The road now lay sometimes across wide moors, which extended as far as the eye could reach, sometimes through thick forests of firs, of which they thought they should never get to the end. Everywhere was a desert; the villages were almost entirely abandoned. The peasants had fled beyond the Yenisei, hoping that this wide river would perhaps stop the Tartars.

On the 22d of August, the kibitka entered the town of Atchinsk, two hundred and fifty miles from Tomsk. Eighty miles still lay between them and Krasnoiarsk.

No incident had marked the journey. For the six days during which they had been together, Nicholas, Michael, and Nadia had remained the same, the one in his unchange-able calm, the other two, uneasy, and thinking

of the time when their companion would leave them.

Michael saw the country through which they traveled with the eyes of Nicholas and the young girl. In turns, they each described to him the scenes they passed. He knew whether he was in a forest or on a plain, whether a hut was on the steppe, or whether any Siberian was in sight. Nicholas was never silent, he loved to talk, and, from his peculiar way of viewing things, his friends were amused by his conversation. One day, Michael asked him what sort of weather it was.

"Fine enough, little father," he answered, "but soon we shall feel the first winter frosts. Perhaps the Tartars will go into winter quarters during the bad season."

Michael Strogoff shook his head with a doubtful air.

"You do not think so, little father?" resumed Nicholas. "You think that they will march on to Irkutsk?"

"I fear so," replied Michael.

"Yes... you are right; they have with them a bad man, who will not let them loiter on the way. You have heard speak of Ivan Ogareff?"

"Yes."

"You know that it is not right to betray one's country!"

"No... it is not right..." answered Michael, who wished to remain unmoved.

"Little father," continued Nicholas, "it seems to me that you are not half indignant enough when Ivan Ogareff is spoken of. Your Russian heart ought to leap when his name is uttered."

"Believe me, my friend, I hate him more than you can ever hate him," said Michael.

"It is not possible," replied Nicholas; "no, it is not possible! When I think of Ivan Ogareff, of the harm which he is doing to our sacred Russia, I get into such a rage that if I could get hold of him--"

"If you could get hold of him, friend?"

"I think I should kill him."

"And I, I am sure of it," returned Michael quietly.

CHAPTER VII THE PASSAGE OF THE YENISEI

AT nightfall, on the 25th of August, the kibitka came in sight of Krasnoiarsk. The journey from Tomsk had taken eight days. If it had not been accomplished as rapidly as it might, it was because Nicholas had slept little. Consequently, it was impossible to increase his horse's pace, though in other hands, the journey would not have taken sixty hours.

Happily, there was no longer any fear of Tartars. Not a scout had appeared on the road over which the kibitka had just traveled. This was strange enough, and evidently some serious cause had prevented the Emir's troops from marching without delay upon Irkutsk. Something had occurred. A new Russian corps, hastily raised in the government of Yeniseisk, had marched to Tomsk to endeavor to retake the town. But, being too weak to withstand the Emir's troops, now concentrated there, they had been forced to effect a retreat. Feofar-Khan, including his own soldiers, and those of the Khanats of Khokhand and Koun-douze, had now under his command two hundred and fifty thousand men, to which the Russian government could not as yet oppose a sufficient force. The invasion could not, therefore, be immediately stopped, and the whole Tartar army might at once march upon Irkutsk. The battle of Tomsk was on the 22nd of August, though this Michael did not know, but it explained why the vanguard of the Emir's army had not appeared at Krasnoiarsk by the 25th.

However, though Michael Strogoff could not know the events which had occurred since his departure, he at least knew that he was several days in advance of the Tartars, and that he need not despair of reaching before them the town of Irkutsk, still six hundred miles distant.

Besides, at Krasnoiarsk, of which the population is about twelve thousand souls, he depended upon obtaining some means of transport. Since Nicholas Pigassof was to stop in that town, it would be necessary to replace him by a guide, and to change the kibitka for another more rapid vehicle. Michael, after having addressed himself to the governor of the town, and established his identity and quality as Courier of the Czar--which would be easy--doubted not that he would be enabled to get to Irkutsk in the shortest possible time. He would thank the good Nicholas Pigassof, and set out immediately with Nadia, for he did not wish to leave her until he had placed her in her father's arms. Though Nicholas had resolved to stop at Krasnoiarsk, it was only as he said, "on condition of finding employment there." In fact, this model clerk, after having stayed to the last minute at his post in Kolyvan, was endeavoring to place himself again at the disposal of the government. "Why should I receive a salary which I have not earned?" he would say.

In the event of his services not being required at Krasnoiarsk, which it was expected would be still in telegraphic communication with Irkutsk, he proposed to go to Oudinsk, or even to the capital of Siberia itself. In the latter case, he would continue to travel with the brother and sister; and where would they find a surer guide, or a more devoted

friend?

The kibitka was now only half a verst from Krasnoiarsk. The numerous wooden crosses which are erected at the approaches to the town, could be seen to the right and left of the road. It was seven in the evening; the outline of the churches and of the houses built on the high bank of the Yenisei were clearly defined against the evening sky, and the waters of the river reflected them in the twilight.

"Where are we, sister?" asked Michael.

"Half a verst from the first houses," replied Nadia.

"Can the town be asleep?" observed Michael. "Not a sound strikes my ear."

"And I cannot see the slightest light, nor even smoke mounting into the air," added Nadia.

"What a queer town!" said Nicholas. "They make no noise in it, and go to bed uncommonly early!"

A presentiment of impending misfortune passed across Michael's heart. He had not said to Nadia that he had placed all his hopes on Krasnoiarsk, where he expected to find the means of safely finishing his journey. He much feared that his anticipations would again be disappointed.

But Nadia had guessed his thoughts, although she could not understand why her companion should be so anxious to reach Irkutsk, now that the Imperial letter was gone. She one day said something of the sort to him. "I have sworn to go to Irkutsk," he replied.

But to accomplish his mission, it was necessary that at Krasnoiarsk he should find some more rapid mode of locomotion. "Well, friend," said he to Nicholas, "why are we not going on?"

"Because I am afraid of waking up the inhabitants of the town with the noise of my carriage!" And with a light fleck of the whip, Nicholas put his horse in motion.

Ten minutes after they entered the High Street. Krasnoiarsk was deserted; there was no longer an Athenian in this "Northern Athens," as Madame de Bourboulon has called it. Not one of their dashing equipages swept through the wide, clean streets. Not a pedestrian enlivened the footpaths raised at the bases of the magnificent wooden houses, of monumental aspect! Not a Siberian belle, dressed in the last French fashion, promenaded the beautiful park, cleared in a forest of birch trees, which stretches away to the banks of the Yenisei! The great bell of the cathedral was dumb; the chimes of the churches were silent. Here was complete desolation. There was no longer a living being in this town, lately so lively!

The last telegram sent from the Czar's cabinet, before the rupture of the wire, had ordered the governor, the garrison, the inhabitants, whoever they might be, to leave Krasnoiarsk, to carry with them any articles of value, or which might be of use to the Tartars, and to take refuge at Irkutsk. The same injunction was given to all the villages of the province. It was the intention of the Muscovite government to lay the country desert before the invaders. No one thought for an instant of disputing these orders. They were executed, and this was the reason why not a single human being remained in Krasnoiarsk.

Michael Strogoff, Nadia, and Nicholas passed silently through the streets of the town. They felt half-stupefied. They themselves made the only sound to be heard in this dead city. Michael allowed nothing of what he felt to appear, but he inwardly raged against the bad luck which pursued him, his hopes being again disappointed.

"Alack, alack!" cried Nicholas, "I shall never get any employment in this desert!"

"Friend," said Nadia, "you must go on with us."

"I must indeed!" replied Nicholas. "The wire is no doubt still working between Oudinsk and Irkutsk, and there--Shall we start, little father?"

"Let us wait till to-morrow," answered Michael.

"You are right," said Nicholas. "We have the Yenisei to cross, and need light to see our way there!"

"To see!" murmured Nadia, thinking of her blind companion.

Nicholas heard her, and turning to Michael, "Forgive me, little father," said he. "Alas! night and day, it is true, are all the same to you!"

"Do not reproach yourself, friend," replied Michael, pressing his hand over his eyes. "With you for a guide I can still act. Take a few hours' repose. Nadia must rest too. To-morrow we will recommence our journey!"

Michael and his friends had not to search long for a place of rest. The first house, the door of which they pushed open, was empty, as well as all the others. Nothing could be found within but a few heaps of leaves. For want of better fodder the horse had to content himself with this scanty nourishment. The provisions of the kibitka were not yet exhausted, so each had a share. Then, after having knelt before a small picture of the Panaghia, hung on the wall, and still lighted up by a flickering lamp, Nicholas and the young girl slept, whilst Michael, over whom sleep had no influence, watched.

Before daybreak the next morning, the 26th of August, the horse was drawing the kibitka through the forests of birch trees towards the banks of the Yenisei. Michael was in much anxiety. How was he to cross the river, if, as was probable, all boats had been destroyed to retard the

Tartars' march? He knew the Yenisei, its width was considerable, its currents strong. Ordinarily by means of boats specially built for the conveyance of travelers, carriages, and horses, the passage of the Yenisei takes about three hours, and then it is with extreme difficulty that the boats reach the opposite bank. Now, in the absence of any ferry, how was the kibitka to get from one bank to the other?

Day was breaking when the kibitka reached the left bank, where one of the wide alleys of the park ended. They were about a hundred feet above the Yenisei, and could therefore survey the whole of its wide course.

"Do you see a boat?" asked Michael, casting his eyes eagerly about from one side to the other, mechanically, no doubt, as if he could really see.

"It is scarcely light yet, brother," replied Nadia. "The fog is still thick, and we cannot see the water."

"But I hear it roaring," said Michael.

Indeed, from the fog issued a dull roaring sound. The waters being high rushed down with tumultuous violence. All three waited until the misty curtain should rise. The sun would not be long in dispersing the vapors.

"Well?" asked Michael.

"The fog is beginning to roll away, brother," replied Nadia, "and it will soon be clear."

"Then you do not see the surface of the water yet?"

"Not yet."

"Have patience, little father," said Nicholas. "All this will soon disappear. Look! here comes the breeze! It is driving away the fog. The trees on the opposite hills are already appearing. It is sweeping, flying away. The kindly rays of the sun have condensed all that mass of mist. Ah! how beautiful it is, my poor fellow, and how unfortunate that you cannot see such a lovely sight!"

"Do you see a boat?" asked Michael.

"I see nothing of the sort," answered Nicholas.

"Look well, friend, on this and the opposite bank, as far as your eye can reach. A raft, even a canoe?"

Nicholas and Nadia, grasping the bushes on the edge of the cliff, bent over the water. The view they thus obtained was extensive. At this place the Yenisei is not less than a mile in width, and forms two arms, of unequal size, through which the waters flow swiftly. Between these arms lie several islands, covered with alders, willows, and poplars, looking

like verdant ships, anchored in the river. Beyond rise the high hills of the Eastern shore, crowned with forests, whose tops were then empurpled with light. The Yenisei stretched on either side as far as the eye could reach. The beautiful panorama lay before them for a distance of fifty versts.

But not a boat was to be seen. All had been taken away or destroyed, according to order. Unless the Tartars should bring with them materials for building a bridge of boats, their march towards Irkutsk would certainly be stopped for some time by this barrier, the Yenisei.

"I remember," said Michael, "that higher up, on the outskirts of Krasnoiarsk, there is a little quay. There the boats touch. Friend, let us go up the river, and see if some boat has not been forgotten on the bank."

Nadia seized Michael's hand and started off at a rapid pace in the direction indicated. If only a boat or a barge large enough to hold the kibitka could be found, or even one that would carry just themselves, Michael would not hesitate to attempt the passage! Twenty minutes after, all three had reached the little quay, with houses on each side quite down to the water's edge. It was like a village standing beyond the town of Krasnoiarsk.

But not a boat was on the shore, not a barge at the little wharf, nothing even of which a raft could be made large enough to carry three

people. Michael questioned Nicholas, who made the discouraging reply that the crossing appeared to him absolutely impracticable.

"We shall cross!" answered Michael.

The search was continued. They examined the houses on the shore, abandoned like all the rest of Krasnoiarsk. They had merely to push open the doors and enter. The cottages were evidently those of poor people, and quite empty. Nicholas visited one, Nadia entered another, and even Michael went here and there and felt about, hoping to light upon some article that might be useful.

Nicholas and the girl had each fruitlessly rummaged these cottages and were about to give up the search, when they heard themselves called. Both ran to the bank and saw Michael standing on the threshold of a door.

"Come!" he exclaimed. Nicholas and Nadia went towards him and followed him into the cottage.

"What are these?" asked Michael, touching several objects piled up in a corner.

"They are leathern bottles," answered Nicholas.

"Are they full?"

"Yes, full of koumyss. We have found them very opportunely to renew our provisions!"

"Koumyss" is a drink made of mare's or camel's milk, and is very sustaining, and even intoxicating; so that Nicholas and his companions could not but congratulate themselves on the discovery.

"Save one," said Michael, "but empty the others."

"Directly, little father."

"These will help us to cross the Yenisei."

"And the raft?"

"Will be the kibitka itself, which is light enough to float. Besides, we will sustain it, as well as the horse, with these bottles."

"Well thought of, little father," exclaimed Nicholas, "and by God's help we will get safely over... though perhaps not in a straight line, for the current is very rapid!"

"What does that matter?" replied Michael. "Let us get across first, and we shall soon find out the road to Irkutsk on the other side of the river."

"To work, then," said Nicholas, beginning to empty the bottles.

One full of koumyss was reserved, and the rest, with the air carefully fastened in, were used to form a floating apparatus. Two bottles were fastened to the horse's sides to support it in the water. Two others were attached to the shafts to keep them on a level with the body of the machine, thus transformed into a raft. This work was soon finished.

"You will not be afraid, Nadia?" asked Michael.

"No, brother," answered the girl.

"And you, friend?"

"I?" cried Nicholas. "I am now going to have one of my dreams realized--that of sailing in a cart."

At the spot where they were now standing, the bank sloped, and was suitable for the launching of the kibitka. The horse drew it into the water, and they were soon both floating. As to Serko, he was swimming bravely.

The three passengers, seated in the vehicle, had with due precaution taken off their shoes and stockings; but, thanks to the bottles, the water did not even come over their ankles. Michael held the reins, and,

according to Nicholas's directions, guided the animal obliquely, but cautiously, so as not to exhaust him by struggling against the current. So long as the kibitka went with the current all was easy, and in a few minutes it had passed the quays of Krasnoiarsk. It drifted northwards, and it was soon evident that it would only reach the opposite bank far below the town. But that mattered little. The crossing would have been made without great difficulty, even on this imperfect apparatus, had the current been regular; but, unfortunately, there were whirlpools in numbers, and soon the kibitka, notwithstanding all Michael's efforts, was irresistibly drawn into one of these.

There the danger was great. The kibitka no longer drifted, but spun rapidly round, inclining towards the center of the eddy, like a rider in a circus. The horse could scarcely keep his head above water, and ran a great risk of being suffocated. Serko had been obliged to take refuge in the carriage.

Michael knew what was happening. He felt himself drawn round in a gradually narrowing line, from which they could not get free. How he longed to see, to be better able to avoid this peril, but that was no longer possible. Nadia was silent, her hands clinging to the sides of the cart, which was inclining more and more towards the center of depression.

And Nicholas, did he not understand the gravity of the situation? Was it with him phlegm or contempt of danger, courage or indifference? Was his

life valueless in his eyes, and, according to the Eastern expression, "an hotel for five days," which, whether one is willing or not, must be left the sixth? At any rate, the smile on his rosy face never faded for an instant.

The kibitka was thus in the whirlpool, and the horse was nearly exhausted, when, all at once, Michael, throwing off such of his garments as might impede him, jumped into the water; then, seizing with a strong hand the bridle of the terrified horse, he gave him such an impulse that he managed to struggle out of the circle, and getting again into the current, the kibitka drifted along anew.

"Hurrah!" exclaimed Nicholas.

Two hours after leaving the wharf, the kibitka had crossed the widest arm of the river, and had landed on an island more than six versts below the starting point.

There the horse drew the cart onto the bank, and an hour's rest was given to the courageous animal; then the island having been crossed under the shade of its magnificent birches, the kibitka found itself on the shore of the smaller arm of the Yenisei.

This passage was much easier; no whirlpools broke the course of the river in this second bed; but the current was so rapid that the kibitka only reached the opposite side five versts below. They had drifted

eleven versts in all.

These great Siberian rivers across which no bridges have as yet been thrown, are serious obstacles to the facility of communication. All had been more or less unfortunate to Michael Strogoff. On the Irtych, the boat which carried him and Nadia had been attacked by Tartars. On the Obi, after his horse had been struck by a bullet, he had only by a miracle escaped from the horsemen who were pursuing him. In fact, this passage of the Yenisei had been performed the least disastrously.

"That would not have been so amusing," exclaimed Nicholas, rubbing his hands, as they disembarked on the right bank of the river, "if it had not been so difficult."

"That which has only been difficult to us, friend," answered Michael Strogoff, "will, perhaps, be impossible to the Tartars."

CHAPTER VIII A HARE CROSSES THE ROAD

MICHAEL STROGOFF might at last hope that the road to Irkutsk was clear. He had distanced the Tartars, now detained at Tomsk, and when the Emir's soldiers should arrive at Krasnoiarsk they would find only a deserted town. There being no communication between the two banks of the Yenisei, a delay of some days would be caused until a bridge of boats could be established, and to accomplish this would be a difficult undertaking.
For the first time since the encounter with Ivan Ogareff at Omsk, the courier of the Czar felt less uneasy, and began to hope that no fresh obstacle would delay his progress.

The road was good, for that part of it which extends between Krasnoiarsk and Irkutsk is considered the best in the whole journey; fewer jolts for travelers, large trees to shade them from the heat of the sun, sometimes forests of pines or cedars covering an extent of a hundred versts.
It was no longer the wide steppe with limitless horizon; but the rich country was empty. Everywhere they came upon deserted villages. The Siberian peasantry had vanished. It was a desert, but a desert by order of the Czar.

The weather was fine, but the air, which cooled during the night, took some time to get warm again. Indeed it was now near September, and in this high region the days were sensibly shortening. Autumn here lasts but a very little while, although this part of Siberian territory is not situated above the fifty-fifth parallel, that of Edinburgh and

Copenhagen. However, winter succeeds summer almost unexpectedly. These winters of Asiatic Russia may be said to be precocious, considering that during them the thermometer falls until the mercury is frozen nearly 42 degrees below zero, and that 20 degrees below zero is considered an unsupportable temperature.

The weather favored our travelers. It was neither stormy nor rainy. The health of Nadia and Michael was good, and since leaving Tomsk they had gradually recovered from their past fatigues.

As to Nicholas Pigassof, he had never been better in his life. To him this journey was a trip, an agreeable excursion in which he employed his enforced holiday.

"Decidedly," said he, "this is pleasanter than sitting twelve hours a day, perched on a stool, working the manip-ulator!"

Michael had managed to get Nicholas to make his horse quicken his pace. To obtain this result, he had confided to Nicholas that Nadia and he were on their way to join their father, exiled at Irkutsk, and that they were very anxious to get there. Certainly, it would not do to overwork the horse, for very probably they would not be able to exchange him for another; but by giving him frequent rests--every ten miles, for instance--forty miles in twenty-four hours could easily be accomplished. Besides, the animal was strong, and of a race calculated to endure great

fatigue. He was in no want of rich pasturage along the road, the grass being thick and abundant. Therefore, it was possible to demand an increase of work from him.

Nicholas gave in to all these reasons. He was much moved at the situation of these two young people, going to share their father's exile. Nothing had ever appeared so touching to him. With what a smile he said to Nadia: "Divine goodness! what joy will Mr. Korpanoff feel, when his eyes behold you, when his arms open to receive you! If I go to Irkutsk--and that appears very probable now--will you permit me to be present at that interview! You will, will you not?" Then, striking his forehead: "But, I forgot, what grief too when he sees that his poor son is blind! Ah! everything is mingled in this world!"

However, the result of all this was the kibitka went faster, and, according to Michael's calculations, now made almost eight miles an hour.

After crossing the little river Biriousa, the kibitka reached Biriousensk on the morning of the 4th of September. There, very fortunately, for Nicholas saw that his provisions were becoming exhausted, he found in an oven a dozen "pogatchas," a kind of cake prepared with sheep's fat and a large supply of plain boiled rice. This increase was very opportune, for something would soon have been needed to replace the koumyss with which the kibitka had been stored at Krasnoiarsk.

After a halt, the journey was continued in the afternoon. The distance to Irkutsk was not now much over three hundred miles. There was not a sign of the Tartar vanguard. Michael Strogoff had some grounds for hoping that his journey would not be again delayed, and that in eight days, or at most ten, he would be in the presence of the Grand Duke.

On leaving Biriousinsk, a hare ran across the road, in front of the kibitka. "Ah!" exclaimed Nicholas.

"What is the matter, friend?" asked Michael quickly, like a blind man whom the least sound arouses.

"Did you not see?" said Nicholas, whose bright face had become suddenly clouded. Then he added, "Ah! no! you could not see, and it's lucky for you, little father!"

"But I saw nothing," said Nadia.

"So much the better! So much the better! But I--I saw!"

"What was it then?" asked Michael.

"A hare crossing our road!" answered Nicholas.

In Russia, when a hare crosses the path, the popular belief is that

it is the sign of approaching evil. Nicholas, superstitious like the greater number of Russians, stopped the kibitka.

Michael understood his companion's hesitation, without sharing his credulity, and endeavored to reassure him, "There is nothing to fear, friend," said he.

"Nothing for you, nor for her, I know, little father," answered Nicholas, "but for me!"

"It is my fate," he continued. And he put his horse in motion again. However, in spite of these forebodings the day passed without any accident.

At twelve o'clock the next day, the 6th of September, the kibitka halted in the village of Alsalevok, which was as deserted as the surrounding country. There, on a doorstep, Nadia found two of those strong-bladed knives used by Siberian hunters. She gave one to Michael, who concealed it among his clothes, and kept the other herself.

Nicholas had not recovered his usual spirits. The ill-omen had affected him more than could have been believed, and he who formerly was never half an hour without speaking, now fell into long reveries from which Nadia found it difficult to arouse him. The kibitka rolled swiftly along the road. Yes, swiftly! Nicholas no longer thought of being so careful of his horse, and was as anxious to arrive at his journey's end as

Michael himself. Notwithstanding his fatalism, and though resigned, he would not believe himself in safety until within the walls of Irkutsk. Many Russians would have thought as he did, and more than one would have turned his horse and gone back again, after a hare had crossed his path.

Some observations made by him, the justice of which was proved by Nadia transmitting them to Michael, made them fear that their trials were not yet over. Though the land from Krasnoiarsk had been respected in its natural productions, its forests now bore trace of fire and steel; and it was evident that some large body of men had passed that way.

Twenty miles before Nijni-Oudinsk, the indications of recent devastation could not be mistaken, and it was impossible to attribute them to others than the Tartars. It was not only that the fields were trampled by horse's feet, and that trees were cut down. The few houses scattered along the road were not only empty, some had been partly demolished, others half burnt down. The marks of bullets could be seen on their walls.

Michael's anxiety may be imagined. He could no longer doubt that a party of Tartars had recently passed that way, and yet it was impossible that they could be the Emir's soldiers, for they could not have passed without being seen. But then, who were these new invaders, and by what out-of-the-way path across the steppe had they been able to join the highroad to Irkutsk? With what new enemies was the Czar's courier now to meet?

He did not communicate his apprehensions either to Nicholas or Nadia, not wishing to make them uneasy. Besides, he had resolved to continue his way, as long as no insurmountable obstacle stopped him. Later, he would see what it was best to do. During the ensuing day, the recent passage of a large body of foot and horse became more and more apparent. Smoke was seen above the horizon. The kibitka advanced cautiously. Several houses in deserted villages still burned, and could not have been set on fire more than four and twenty hours before.

At last, during the day, on the 8th of September, the kibitka stopped suddenly. The horse refused to advance. Serko barked furiously.

"What is the matter?" asked Michael.

"A corpse!" replied Nicholas, who had leapt out of the kibitka. The body was that of a moujik, horribly mutilated, and already cold. Nicholas crossed himself. Then, aided by Michael, he carried the body to the side of the road. He would have liked to give it decent burial, that the wild beasts of the steppe might not feast on the miserable remains, but Michael could not allow him the time.

"Come, friend, come!" he exclaimed, "we must not delay, even for an hour!" And the kibitka was driven on.

Besides, if Nicholas had wished to render the last duties to all the

dead bodies they were now to meet with on the Siberian highroad, he would have had enough to do! As they approached Nijni-Oudinsk, they were found by twenties, stretched on the ground.

It was, however, necessary to follow this road until it was manifestly impossible to do so longer without falling into the hands of the invaders. The road they were following could not be abandoned, and yet the signs of devastation and ruin increased at every village they passed through. The blood of the victims was not yet dry. As to gaining information about what had occurred, that was impossible. There was not a living being left to tell the tale.

About four o'clock in the afternoon of this day, Nicholas caught sight of the tall steeples of the churches of Nijni-Oudinsk. Thick vapors, which could not have been clouds, were floating around them.

Nicholas and Nadia looked, and communicated the result of their observations to Michael. They must make up their minds what to do. If the town was abandoned, they could pass through without risk, but if, by some inexplicable maneuver, the Tartars occupied it, they must at every cost avoid the place.

"Advance cautiously," said Michael Strogoff, "but advance!"

A verst was soon traversed.

"Those are not clouds, that is smoke!" exclaimed Nadia. "Brother, they are burning the town!"

It was, indeed, only too plain. Flashes of light appeared in the midst of the vapor. It became thicker and thicker as it mounted upwards. But were they Tartars who had done this? They might be Russians, obeying the orders of the Grand Duke. Had the government of the Czar determined that from Krasnoiarsk, from the Yenisei, not a town, not a village should offer a refuge to the Emir's soldiers? What was Michael to do?

He was undecided. However, having weighed the pros and cons, he thought that whatever might be the difficulties of a journey across the steppe without a beaten path, he ought not to risk capture a second time by the Tartars. He was just proposing to Nicholas to leave the road, when a shot was heard on their right. A ball whistled, and the horse of the kibitka fell dead, shot through the head.

A dozen horsemen dashed forward, and the kibitka was surrounded. Before they knew where they were, Michael, Nadia, and Nicholas were prisoners, and were being dragged rapidly towards Nijni-Oudinsk.

Michael, in this second attack, had lost none of his presence of mind. Being unable to see his enemies, he had not thought of defending himself. Even had he possessed the use of his eyes, he would not have attempted it. The consequences would have been his death and that of his companions. But, though he could not see, he could listen and understand

what was said.

From their language he found that these soldiers were Tartars, and from their words, that they preceded the invading army.

In short, what Michael learnt from the talk at the present moment, as well as from the scraps of conversation he overheard later, was this. These men were not under the direct orders of the Emir, who was now detained beyond the Yenisei. They made part of a third column chiefly composed of Tartars from the khanats of Khokland and Koondooz, with which Feofar's army was to affect a junction in the neighborhood of Irkutsk.

By Ogareff's advice, in order to assure the success of the invasion in the Eastern provinces, this column had skirted the base of the Altai Mountains. Pillaging and ravaging, it had reached the upper course of the Yenisei. There, guessing what had been done at Krasnoiarsk by order of the Czar, and to facilitate the passage of the river to the Emir's troops, this column had launched a flotilla of boats, which would enable Feofar to cross and resume the road to Irkutsk. Having done this, it had descended the valley of the Yenisei and struck the road on a level with Alsalevsk. From this little town began the frightful course of ruin which forms the chief part of Tartar warfare. Nijni-Oudinsk had shared the common fate, and the Tartars, to the number of fifty thousand, had now quitted it to take up a position before Irkutsk. Before long, they would be reinforced by the Emir's troops.

Such was the state of affairs at this date, most serious for this isolated part of Eastern Siberia, and for the comparatively few defenders of its capital.

It can be imagined with what thoughts Michael's mind was now occupied! Who could have been astonished had he, in his present situation, lost all hope and all courage? Nothing of the sort, however; his lips muttered no other words than these: "I will get there!"

Half an hour after the attack of the Tartar horsemen, Michael Strogoff, Nadia, and Nicholas entered Nijni-Oudinsk. The faithful dog followed them, though at a distance. They could not stay in the town, as it was in flames, and about to be left by the last of the marauders. The prisoners were therefore thrown on horses and hurried away; Nicholas resigned as usual, Nadia, her faith in Michael unshaken, and Michael himself, apparently indifferent, but ready to seize any opportunity of escaping.

The Tartars were not long in perceiving that one of their prisoners was blind, and their natural barbarity led them to make game of their unfortunate victim. They were traveling fast. Michael's horse, having no one to guide him, often started aside, and so made confusion among the ranks. This drew on his rider such abuse and brutality as wrung Nadia's heart, and filled Nicholas with indignation. But what could they do? They could not speak the Tartar language, and their assistance was

mercilessly refused. Soon it occurred to these men, in a refinement of cruelty, to exchange the horse Michael was riding for one which was blind. The motive of the change was explained by a remark which Michael overheard, "Perhaps that Russian can see, after all!"

Michael was placed on this horse, and the reins ironically put into his hand. Then, by dint of lashing, throwing stones, and shouting, the animal was urged into a gallop. The horse, not being guided by his rider, blind as himself, sometimes ran into a tree, sometimes went quite off the road--in consequence, collisions and falls, which might have been extremely dangerous.

Michael did not complain. Not a murmur escaped him. When his horse fell, he waited until it got up. It was, indeed, soon assisted up, and the cruel fun continued. At sight of this wicked treatment, Nicholas could not contain himself; he endeavored to go to his friend's aid. He was prevented, and treated brutally.

This game would have been prolonged, to the Tartars' great amusement, had not a serious accident put an end to it. On the 10th of September the blind horse ran away, and made straight for a pit, some thirty or forty feet deep, at the side of the road.

Nicholas tried to go after him. He was held back. The horse, having no guide, fell with his rider to the bottom. Nicholas and Nadia uttered a piercing cry! They believed that their unfortunate companion had been

killed.

However, when they went to his assistance, it was found that Michael, having been able to throw himself out of the saddle, was unhurt, but the miserable horse had two legs broken, and was quite useless. He was left there to die without being put out of his suffering, and Michael, fastened to a Tartar's saddle, was obliged to follow the detachment on foot.

Even now, not a protest, not a complaint! He marched with a rapid step, scarcely drawn by the cord which tied him. He was still "the Man of Iron," of whom General Kissoff had spoken to the Czar!

The next day, the 11th of September, the detachment passed through the village of Chibarlinskoe. Here an incident occurred which had serious consequences. It was nightfall. The Tartar horsemen, having halted, were more or less intoxicated. They were about to start. Nadia, who till then, by a miracle, had been respectfully treated by the soldiers, was insulted by one of them.

Michael could not see the insult, nor the insulter, but Nicholas saw for him. Then, quietly, without thinking, without perhaps knowing what he was doing, Nicholas walked straight up to the man, and, before the latter could make the least movement to stop him, had seized a pistol from his holster and discharged it full at his breast.

The officer in command of the detachment hastened up on hearing the report. The soldiers would have cut the unfortunate Nicholas to pieces, but at a sign from their officer, he was bound instead, placed across a horse, and the detachment galloped off.

The rope which fastened Michael, gnawed through by him, broke by the sudden start of the horse, and the half-tipsy rider galloped on without perceiving that his prisoner had escaped.

Michael and Nadia found themselves alone on the road.

CHAPTER IX IN THE STEPPE

MICHAEL STROGOFF and Nadia were once more as free as they had been in the journey from Perm to the banks of the Irtych. But how the conditions under which they traveled were altered! Then, a comfortable tarantass, fresh horses, well-kept post-horses assured the rapidity of their journey. Now they were on foot; it was utterly impossible to procure any other means of locomotion, they were without resources, not knowing how to obtain even food, and they had still nearly three hundred miles to go! Moreover, Michael could now only see with Nadia's eyes.

As to the friend whom chance had given them, they had just lost him, and fearful might be his fate. Michael had thrown himself down under the brushwood at the side of the road. Nadia stood beside him, waiting for the word from him to continue the march.

It was ten o'clock. The sun had more than three hours before disappeared below the horizon. There was not a house in sight. The last of the Tartars was lost in the distance. Michael and Nadia were quite alone.

"What will they do with our friend?" exclaimed the girl. "Poor Nicholas! Our meeting will have been fatal to him!" Michael made no response.

"Michael," continued Nadia, "do you not know that he defended you when you were the Tartars' sport; that he risked his life for me?"

Michael was still silent. Motionless, his face buried in his hands; of what was he thinking? Perhaps, although he did not answer, he heard Nadia speak.

Yes! he heard her, for when the young girl added, "Where shall I lead you, Michael?"

"To Irkutsk!" he replied.

"By the highroad?"

"Yes, Nadia."

Michael was still the same man who had sworn, whatever happened, to accomplish his object. To follow the highroad, was certainly to go the shortest way. If the vanguard of Feofar-Khan's troops appeared, it would then be time to strike across the country.

Nadia took Michael's hand, and they started.

The next morning, the 13th of September, twenty versts further, they made a short halt in the village of Joulounov-skoe. It was burnt and deserted. All night Nadia had tried to see if the body of Nicholas had not been left on the road, but it was in vain that she looked among the ruins, and searched among the dead. Was he reserved for some cruel torture at Irkutsk?

Nadia, exhausted with hunger, was fortunate enough to find in one of the houses a quantity of dried meat and "soukharis," pieces of bread, which, dried by evaporation, preserve their nutritive qualities for an indefinite time.

Michael and the girl loaded themselves with as much as they could carry. They had thus a supply of food for several days, and as to water, there would be no want of that in a district rendered fertile by the numerous little affluents of the Angara.

They continued their journey. Michael walked with a firm step, and only slackened his pace for his companion's sake. Nadia, not wishing to retard him, obliged herself to walk. Happily, he could not see to what a miserable state fatigue had reduced her.

However, Michael guessed it. "You are quite done up, poor child," he said sometimes.

"No," she would reply.

"When you can no longer walk, I will carry you."

"Yes, Michael."

During this day they came to the little river Oka, but it was fordable,

and they had no difficulty in crossing. The sky was cloudy and the temperature moderate. There was some fear that the rain might come on, which would much have increased their misery. A few showers fell, but they did not last.

They went on as before, hand in hand, speaking little, Nadia looking about on every side; twice a day they halted. Six hours of the night were given to sleep. In a few huts Nadia again found a little mutton; but, contrary to Michael's hopes, there was not a single beast of burden in the country; horses, camels--all had been either killed or carried off. They must still continue to plod on across this weary steppe on foot.

The third Tartar column, on its way to Irkutsk, had left plain traces: here a dead horse, there an abandoned cart. The bodies of unfortunate Siberians lay along the road, principally at the entrances to villages. Nadia, overcoming her repugnance, looked at all these corpses!

The chief danger lay, not before, but behind. The advance guard of the Emir's army, commanded by Ivan Ogareff, might at any moment appear. The boats sent down the lower Yenisei must by this time have reached Krasnoiarsk and been made use of. The road was therefore open to the invaders. No Russian force could be opposed to them between Krasnoiarsk and Lake Baikal, Michael therefore expected before long the appearance of the Tartar scouts.

At each halt, Nadia climbed some hill and looked anxiously to the Westward, but as yet no cloud of dust had signaled the approach of a troop of horse.

Then the march was resumed; and when Michael felt that he was dragging poor Nadia forward too rapidly, he went at a slower pace. They spoke little, and only of Nicholas. The young girl recalled all that this companion of a few days had done for them.

In answering, Michael tried to give Nadia some hope of which he did not feel a spark himself, for he well knew that the unfortunate fellow would not escape death.

One day Michael said to the girl, "You never speak to me of my mother, Nadia."

His mother! Nadia had never wished to do so. Why renew his grief? Was not the old Siberian dead? Had not her son given the last kiss to her corpse stretched on the plain of Tomsk?

"Speak to me of her, Nadia," said Michael. "Speak--you will please me."

And then Nadia did what she had not done before. She told all that had passed between Marfa and herself since their meeting at Omsk, where they had seen each other for the first time. She said how an inexplicable instinct had led her towards the old prisoner without knowing who she

was, and what encouragement she had received in return. At that time Michael Strogoff had been to her but Nicholas Korpanoff.

"Whom I ought always to have been," replied Michael, his brow darkening.

Then later he added, "I have broken my oath, Nadia. I had sworn not to see my mother!"

"But you did not try to see her, Michael," replied Nadia. "Chance alone brought you into her presence."

"I had sworn, whatever might happen, not to betray myself."

"Michael, Michael! at sight of the lash raised upon Marfa, could you refrain? No! No oath could prevent a son from succoring his mother!"

"I have broken my oath, Nadia," returned Michael. "May God and the Father pardon me!"

"Michael," resumed the girl, "I have a question to ask you. Do not answer it if you think you ought not. Nothing from you would vex me!"

"Speak, Nadia."

"Why, now that the Czar's letter has been taken from you, are you so anxious to reach Irkutsk?"

Michael tightly pressed his companion's hand, but he did not answer.

"Did you know the contents of that letter before you left Moscow?"

"No, I did not know."

"Must I think, Michael, that the wish alone to place me in my father's hands draws you toward Irkutsk?"

"No, Nadia," replied Michael, gravely. "I should deceive you if I allowed you to believe that it was so. I go where duty orders me to go. As to taking you to Irkutsk, is it not you, Nadia, who are now taking me there? Do I not see with your eyes; and is it not your hand that guides me? Have you not repaid a hundred-fold the help which I was able to give you at first? I do not know if fate will cease to go against us; but the day on which you thank me for having placed you in your father's hands, I in my turn will thank you for having led me to Irkutsk."

"Poor Michael!" answered Nadia, with emotion. "Do not speak so. That does not answer me. Michael, why, now, are you in such haste to reach Irkutsk?"

"Because I must be there before Ivan Ogareff," exclaimed Michael.

"Even now?"

"Even now, and I will be there, too!"

In uttering these words, Michael did not speak solely through hatred to the traitor. Nadia understood that her companion had not told, or could not tell, her all.

On the 15th of September, three days later, the two reached the village of Kouitounskoe. The young girl suffered dreadfully. Her aching feet could scarcely support her; but she fought, she struggled, against her weariness, and her only thought was this: "Since he cannot see me, I will go on till I drop."

There were no obstacles on this part of the journey, no danger either since the departure of the Tartars, only much fatigue. For three days it continued thus. It was plain that the third invading column was advancing rapidly in the East; that could be seen by the ruins which they left after them--the cold cinders and the already decomposing corpses.

There was nothing to be seen in the West; the Emir's advance-guard had not yet appeared. Michael began to consider the various reasons which might have caused this delay. Was a sufficient force of Russians directly menacing Tomsk or Krasnoiarsk? Did the third column, isolated from the others, run a risk of being cut off? If this was the case, it would be easy for the Grand Duke to defend Irkutsk, and any time gained

against an invasion was a step towards repulsing it. Michael sometimes let his thoughts run on these hopes, but he soon saw their improbability, and felt that the preservation of the Grand Duke depended alone on him.

Nadia dragged herself along. Whatever might be her moral energy, her physical strength would soon fail her. Michael knew it only too well. If he had not been blind, Nadia would have said to him, "Go, Michael, leave me in some hut! Reach Irkutsk! Accomplish your mission! See my father! Tell him where I am! Tell him that I wait for him, and you both will know where to find me! Start! I am not afraid! I will hide myself from the Tartars! I will take care of myself for him, for you! Go, Michael! I can go no farther!"

Many times Nadia was obliged to stop. Michael then took her in his strong arms and, having no longer to think of her fatigue, walked more rapidly and with his indefatigable step.

On the 18th of September, at ten in the evening, Kimilteiskoe was at last entered. From the top of a hill, Nadia saw in the horizon a long light line. It was the Dinka River. A few lightning flashes were reflected in the water; summer lightning, without thunder. Nadia led her companion through the ruined village. The cinders were quite cold. The last of the Tartars had passed through at least five or six days before.

Beyond the village, Nadia sank down on a stone bench. "Shall we make a

halt?" asked Michael.

"It is night, Michael," answered Nadia. "Do you not want to rest a few hours?"

"I would rather have crossed the Dinka," replied Michael, "I should like to put that between us and the Emir's advance-guard. But you can scarcely drag yourself along, my poor Nadia!"

"Come, Michael," returned Nadia, seizing her companion's hand and drawing him forward.

Two or three versts further the Dinka flowed across the Irkutsk road. The young girl wished to attempt this last effort asked by her companion. She found her way by the light from the flashes. They were then crossing a boundless desert, in the midst of which was lost the little river. Not a tree nor a hillock broke the flatness. Not a breath disturbed the atmosphere, whose calmness would allow the slightest sound to travel an immense distance.

Suddenly, Michael and Nadia stopped, as if their feet had been fast to the ground. The barking of a dog came across the steppe. "Do you hear?" said Nadia.

Then a mournful cry succeeded it--a despairing cry, like the last appeal of a human being about to die.

"Nicholas! Nicholas!" cried the girl, with a foreboding of evil.
Michael, who was listening, shook his head.

"Come, Michael, come," said Nadia. And she who just now was dragging herself with difficulty along, suddenly recovered strength, under violent excitement.

"We have left the road," said Michael, feeling that he was treading no longer on powdery soil but on short grass.

"Yes, we must!" returned Nadia. "It was there, on the right, from which the cry came!"

In a few minutes they were not more than half a verst from the river. A second bark was heard, but, although more feeble, it was certainly nearer. Nadia stopped.

"Yes!" said Michael. "It is Serko barking!... He has followed his master!"

"Nicholas!" called the girl. Her cry was unanswered.

Michael listened. Nadia gazed over the plain illumined now and again with electric light, but she saw nothing. And yet a voice was again raised, this time murmuring in a plaintive tone, "Michael!"

Then a dog, all bloody, bounded up to Nadia.

It was Serko! Nicholas could not be far off! He alone could have murmured the name of Michael! Where was he? Nadia had no strength to call again. Michael, crawling on the ground, felt about with his hands.

Suddenly Serko uttered a fresh bark and darted towards a gigantic bird which had swooped down. It was a vulture. When Serko ran towards it, it rose, but returning struck at the dog. The latter leapt up at it. A blow from the formidable beak alighted on his head, and this time Serko fell back lifeless on the ground.

At the same moment a cry of horror escaped Nadia. "There... there!" she exclaimed.

A head issued from the ground! She had stumbled against it in the darkness.

Nadia fell on her knees beside it. Nicholas buried up to his neck, according to the atrocious Tartar custom, had been left in the steppe to die of thirst, and perhaps by the teeth of wolves or the beaks of birds of prey!

Frightful torture for the victim imprisoned in the ground--the earth pressed down so that he cannot move, his arms bound to his body like

those of a corpse in its coffin! The miserable wretch, living in the mold of clay from which he is powerless to break out, can only long for the death which is so slow in coming!

There the Tartars had buried their prisoner three days before! For three days, Nicholas waited for the help which now came too late! The vultures had caught sight of the head on a level with the ground, and for some hours the dog had been defending his master against these ferocious birds!

Michael dug at the ground with his knife to release his friend! The eyes of Nicholas, which till then had been closed, opened.

He recognized Michael and Nadia. "Farewell, my friends!" he murmured. "I am glad to have seen you again! Pray for me!"

Michael continued to dig, though the ground, having been tightly rammed down, was as hard as stone, and he managed at last to get out the body of the unhappy man. He listened if his heart was still beating.... It was still!

He wished to bury him, that he might not be left exposed; and the hole into which Nicholas had been placed when living, was enlarged, so that he might be laid in it--dead! The faithful Serko was laid by his master.

At that moment, a noise was heard on the road, about half a verst

distant. Michael Strogoff listened. It was evidently a detachment of horse advancing towards the Dinka. "Nadia, Nadia!" he said in a low voice.

Nadia, who was kneeling in prayer, arose. "Look, look!" said he.

"The Tartars!" she whispered.

It was indeed the Emir's advance-guard, passing rapidly along the road to Irkutsk.

"They shall not prevent me from burying him!" said Michael. And he continued his work.

Soon, the body of Nicholas, the hands crossed on the breast, was laid in the grave. Michael and Nadia, kneeling, prayed a last time for the poor fellow, inoffensive and good, who had paid for his devotion towards them with his life.

"And now," said Michael, as he threw in the earth, "the wolves of the steppe will not devour him."

Then he shook his fist at the troop of horsemen who were passing. "Forward, Nadia!" he said.

Michael could not follow the road, now occupied by the Tartars. He must

cross the steppe and turn to Irkutsk. He had not now to trouble himself about crossing the Dinka. Nadia could not move, but she could see for him. He took her in his arms and went on towards the southwest of the province.

A hundred and forty miles still remained to be traversed. How was the distance to be performed? Should they not succumb to such fatigue? On what were they to live on the way? By what superhuman energy were they to pass the slopes of the Sayansk Mountains? Neither he nor Nadia could answer this!

And yet, twelve days after, on the 2d of October, at six o'clock in the evening, a wide sheet of water lay at Michael Strogoff's feet. It was Lake Baikal.

CHAPTER X BAIKAL AND ANGARA

LAKE BAIKAL is situated seventeen hundred feet above the level of the sea. Its length is about six hundred miles, its breadth seventy. Its depth is not known. Madame de Bourboulon states that, according to the boatmen, it likes to be spoken of as "Madam Sea." If it is called "Sir Lake," it immediately lashes itself into fury. However, it is reported and believed by the Siberians that a Russian is never drowned in it.

This immense basin of fresh water, fed by more than three hundred rivers, is surrounded by magnificent volcanic mountains. It has no other outlet than the Angara, which after passing Irkutsk throws itself into the Yenisei, a little above the town of Yeniseisk. As to the mountains which encase it, they form a branch of the Toungouzes, and are derived from the vast system of the Altai.

In this territory, subject to peculiar climatical conditions, the autumn appears to be absorbed in the precocious winter. It was now the beginning of October. The sun set at five o'clock in the evening, and during the long nights the temperature fell to zero. The first snows, which would last till summer, already whitened the summits of the neighboring hills. During the Siberian winter this inland sea is frozen over to a thickness of several feet, and is crossed by the sleighs of caravans.

Either because there are people who are so wanting in politeness as to

call it "Sir Lake," or for some more meteorological reason, Lake Baikal is subject to violent tempests. Its waves, short like those of all inland seas, are much feared by the rafts, prahms, and steamboats, which furrow it during the summer.

It was the southwest point of the lake which Michael had now reached, carrying Nadia, whose whole life, so to speak, was concentrated in her eyes. But what could these two expect, in this wild region, if it was not to die of exhaustion and famine? And yet, what remained of the long journey of four thousand miles for the Czar's courier to reach his end? Nothing but forty miles on the shore of the lake up to the mouth of the Angara, and sixty miles from the mouth of the Angara to Irkutsk; in all, a hundred miles, or three days' journey for a strong man, even on foot.

Could Michael Strogoff still be that man?

Heaven, no doubt, did not wish to put him to this trial. The fatality which had hitherto pursued his steps seemed for a time to spare him. This end of the Baikal, this part of the steppe, which he believed to be a desert, which it usually is, was not so now. About fifty people were collected at the angle formed by the end of the lake.

Nadia immediately caught sight of this group, when Michael, carrying her in his arms, issued from the mountain pass. The girl feared for a moment that it was a Tartar detachment, sent to beat the shores of the Baikal, in which case flight would have been impossible to them both. But Nadia

was soon reassured.

"Russians!" she exclaimed. And with this last effort, her eyes closed and her head fell on Michael's breast.

But they had been seen, and some of these Russians, running to them, led the blind man and the girl to a little point at which was moored a raft.

The raft was just going to start. These Russians were fugitives of different conditions, whom the same interest had united at Lake Baikal. Driven back by the Tartar scouts, they hoped to obtain a refuge at Irkutsk, but not being able to get there by land, the invaders having occupied both banks of the Angara, they hoped to reach it by descending the river which flows through the town.

Their plan made Michael's heart leap; a last chance was before him, but he had strength to conceal this, wishing to keep his incognito more strictly than ever.

The fugitives' plan was very simple. A current in the lake runs along by the upper bank to the mouth of the Angara; this current they hoped to utilize, and with its assistance to reach the outlet of Lake Baikal. From this point to Irkutsk, the rapid waters of the river would bear them along at a rate of eight miles an hour. In a day and a half they might hope to be in sight of the town.

No kind of boat was to be found; they had been obliged to make one; a raft, or rather a float of wood, similar to those which usually are drifted down Siberian rivers, was constructed. A forest of firs, growing on the bank, had supplied the necessary materials; the trunks, fastened together with osiers, made a platform on which a hundred people could have easily found room.

On board this raft Michael and Nadia were taken. The girl had returned to herself; some food was given to her as well as to her companion. Then, lying on a bed of leaves, she soon fell into a deep sleep.

To those who questioned him, Michael Strogoff said nothing of what had taken place at Tomsk. He gave himself out as an inhabitant of Krasnoiarsk, who had not been able to get to Irkutsk before the Emir's troops arrived on the left bank of the Dinka, and he added that, very probably, the bulk of the Tartar forces had taken up a position before the Siberian capital.

There was not a moment to be lost; besides, the cold was becoming more and more severe. During the night the temperature fell below zero; ice was already forming on the surface of the Baikal. Although the raft managed to pass easily over the lake, it might not be so easy between the banks of the Angara, should pieces of ice be found to block up its course.

At eight in the evening the moorings were cast off, and the raft drifted

in the current along the shore. It was steered by means of long poles, under the management of several muscular moujiks. An old Baikal boatman took command of the raft. He was a man of sixty-five, browned by the sun, and lake breezes. A thick white beard flowed over his chest; a fur cap covered his head; his aspect was grave and austere. His large great-coat, fastened in at the waist, reached down to his heels. This taciturn old fellow was seated in the stern, and issued his commands by gestures. Besides, the chief work consisted in keeping the raft in the current, which ran along the shore, without drifting out into the open.

It has been already said that Russians of all conditions had found a place on the raft. Indeed, to the poor moujiks, the women, old men, and children, were joined two or three pilgrims, surprised on their journey by the invasion; a few monks, and a priest. The pilgrims carried a staff, a gourd hung at the belt, and they chanted psalms in a plaintive voice: one came from the Ukraine, another from the Yellow sea, and a third from the Finland provinces. This last, who was an aged man, carried at his waist a little padlocked collecting-box, as if it had been hung at a church door. Of all that he collected during his long and fatiguing pilgrimage, nothing was for himself; he did not even possess the key of the box, which would only be opened on his return.

The monks came from the North of the Empire. Three months before they had left the town of Archangel. They had visited the sacred islands near the coast of Carelia, the convent of Solovetsk, the convent of Troitsa, those of Saint Antony and Saint Theodosia, at Kiev, that of Kazan, as

well as the church of the Old Believers, and they were now on their way to Irkutsk, wearing the robe, the cowl, and the clothes of serge.

As to the papa, or priest, he was a plain village pastor, one of the six hundred thousand popular pastors which the Russian Empire contains. He was clothed as miserably as the moujiks, not being above them in social position; in fact, laboring like a peasant on his plot of ground; baptis-ing, marrying, burying. He had been able to protect his wife and children from the brutality of the Tartars by sending them away into the Northern provinces. He himself had stayed in his parish up to the last moment; then he was obliged to fly, and, the Irkutsk road being stopped, had come to Lake Baikal.

These priests, grouped in the forward part of the raft, prayed at regular intervals, raising their voices in the silent night, and at the end of each sentence of their prayer, the "Slava Bogu," Glory to God! issued from their lips.

No incident took place during the night. Nadia remained in a sort of stupor, and Michael watched beside her; sleep only overtook him at long intervals, and even then his brain did not rest. At break of day, the raft, delayed by a strong breeze, which counteracted the course of the current, was still forty versts from the mouth of the Angara. It seemed probable that the fugitives could not reach it before three or four o'clock in the evening. This did not trouble them; on the contrary, for they would then descend the river during the night, and the darkness

would also favor their entrance into Irkutsk.

The only anxiety exhibited at times by the old boatman was concerning the formation of ice on the surface of the water. The night had been excessively cold; pieces of ice could be seen drifting towards the West. Nothing was to be dreaded from these, since they could not drift into the Angara, having already passed the mouth; but pieces from the Eastern end of the lake might be drawn by the current between the banks of the river; this would cause difficulty, possibly delay, and perhaps even an insurmountable obstacle which would stop the raft.

Michael therefore took immense interest in ascertaining what was the state of the lake, and whether any large number of ice blocks appeared. Nadia being now awake, he questioned her often, and she gave him an account of all that was going on.

Whilst the blocks were thus drifting, curious phenomena were taking place on the surface of the Baikal. Magnificent jets, from springs of boiling water, shot up from some of those artesian wells which Nature has bored in the very bed of the lake. These jets rose to a great height and spread out in vapor, which was illuminated by the solar rays, and almost immediately condensed by the cold. This curious sight would have assuredly amazed a tourist traveling in peaceful times on this Siberian sea.

At four in the evening, the mouth of the Angara was signaled by the old

boatman, between the high granite rocks of the shore. On the right bank could be seen the little port of Livenitchnaia, its church, and its few houses built on the bank. But the serious thing was that the ice blocks from the East were already drifting between the banks of the Angara, and consequently were descending towards Irkutsk. However, their number was not yet great enough to obstruct the course of the raft, nor the cold great enough to increase their number.

The raft arrived at the little port and there stopped. The old boatman wished to put into harbor for an hour, in order to make some repairs. The trunks threatened to separate, and it was important to fasten them more securely together to resist the rapid current of the Angara.

The old boatman did not expect to receive any fresh fugitives at Livenitchnaia, and yet, the moment the raft touched, two passengers, issuing from a deserted house, ran as fast as they could towards the beach.

Nadia seated on the raft, was abstractedly gazing at the shore. A cry was about to escape her. She seized Michael's hand, who at that moment raised his head.

"What is the matter, Nadia?" he asked.

"Our two traveling companions, Michael."

"The Frenchman and the Englishman whom we met in the defiles of the Ural?"

"Yes."

Michael started, for the strict incognito which he wished to keep ran a risk of being betrayed. Indeed, it was no longer as Nicholas Korpanoff that Jolivet and Blount would now see him, but as the true Michael Strogoff, Courier of the Czar. The two correspondents had already met him twice since their separation at the Ichim post-house--the first time at the Zabediero camp, when he laid open Ivan Ogareff's face with the knout; the second time at Tomsk, when he was condemned by the Emir. They therefore knew who he was and what depended on him.

Michael Strogoff rapidly made up his mind. "Nadia," said he, "when they step on board, ask them to come to me!"

It was, in fact, Blount and Jolivet, whom the course of events had brought to the port of Livenitchnaia, as it had brought Michael Strogoff. As we know, after having been present at the entry of the Tartars into Tomsk, they had departed before the savage execution which terminated the fete. They had therefore never suspected that their former traveling companion had not been put to death, but blinded by order of the Emir.

Having procured horses they had left Tomsk the same evening, with

the fixed determination of henceforward dating their letters from the Russian camp of Eastern Siberia. They proceeded by forced marches towards Irkutsk. They hoped to distance Feofar-Khan, and would certainly have done so, had it not been for the unexpected apparition of the third column, come from the South, up the valley of the Yenisei. They had been cut off, as had been Michael, before being able even to reach the Dinka, and had been obliged to go back to Lake Baikal.

They had been in the place for three days in much perplexity, when the raft arrived. The fugitives' plan was explained to them. There was certainly a chance that they might be able to pass under cover of the night, and penetrate into Irkutsk. They resolved to make the attempt.

Alcide directly communicated with the old boatman, and asked a passage for himself and his companion, offering to pay anything he demanded, whatever it might be.

"No one pays here," replied the old man gravely; "every one risks his life, that is all!"

The two correspondents came on board, and Nadia saw them take their places in the forepart of the raft. Harry Blount was still the reserved Englishman, who had scarcely addressed a word to her during the whole passage over the Ural Mountains. Alcide Jolivet seemed to be rather more grave than usual, and it may be acknowledged that his gravity was justified by the circumstances.

Jolivet had, as has been said, taken his seat on the raft, when he felt a hand laid on his arm. Turning, he recognized Nadia, the sister of the man who was no longer Nicholas Korpanoff, but Michael Strogoff, Courier of the Czar. He was about to make an exclamation of surprise when he saw the young girl lay her finger on her lips.

"Come," said Nadia. And with a careless air, Alcide rose and followed her, making a sign to Blount to accompany him.

But if the surprise of the correspondents had been great at meeting Nadia on the raft it was boundless when they perceived Michael Strogoff, whom they had believed to be no longer living.

Michael had not moved at their approach. Jolivet turned towards the girl. "He does not see you, gentlemen," said Nadia. "The Tartars have burnt out his eyes! My poor brother is blind!"

A feeling of lively compassion exhibited itself on the faces of Blount and his companion. In a moment they were seated beside Michael, pressing his hand and waiting until he spoke to them.

"Gentlemen," said Michael, in a low voice, "you ought not to know who I am, nor what I am come to do in Siberia. I ask you to keep my secret. Will you promise me to do so?"

"On my honor," answered Jolivet.

"On my word as a gentleman," added Blount.

"Good, gentlemen."

"Can we be of any use to you?" asked Harry Blount. "Could we not help you to accomplish your task?"

"I prefer to act alone," replied Michael.

"But those blackguards have destroyed your sight," said Alcide.

"I have Nadia, and her eyes are enough for me!"

In half an hour the raft left the little port of Livenitchnaia, and entered the river. It was five in the evening and getting dusk. The night promised to be dark and very cold also, for the temperature was already below zero.

Alcide and Blount, though they had promised to keep Michael's secret, did not leave him. They talked in a low voice, and the blind man, adding what they told him to what he already knew, was able to form an exact idea of the state of things. It was certain that the Tartars had actually invested Irkutsk, and that the three columns had effected a junction. There was no doubt that the Emir and Ivan Ogareff were before

the capital.

But why did the Czar's courier exhibit such haste to get there, now that the Imperial letter could no longer be given by him to the Grand Duke, and when he did not even know the contents of it? Alcide Jolivet and Blount could not understand it any more than Nadia had done.

No one spoke of the past, except when Jolivet thought it his duty to say to Michael, "We owe you some apology for not shaking hands with you when we separated at Ichim."

"No, you had reason to think me a coward!"

"At any rate," added the Frenchman, "you knouted the face of that villain finely, and he will carry the mark of it for a long time!"

"No, not a long time!" replied Michael quietly.

Half an hour after leaving Livenitchnaia, Blount and his companion were acquainted with the cruel trials through which Michael and his companion had successively passed. They could not but heartily admire his energy, which was only equaled by the young girl's devotion. Their opinion of Michael was exactly what the Czar had expressed at Moscow: "Indeed, this is a Man!"

The raft swiftly threaded its way among the blocks of ice which were

carried along in the current of the Angara. A moving panorama was displayed on both sides of the river, and, by an optical illusion, it appeared as if it was the raft which was motionless before a succession of picturesque scenes. Here were high granite cliffs, there wild gorges, down which rushed a torrent; sometimes appeared a clearing with a still smoking village, then thick pine forests blazing. But though the Tartars had left their traces on all sides, they themselves were not to be seen as yet, for they were more especially massed at the approaches to Irkutsk.

All this time the pilgrims were repeating their prayers aloud, and the old boatman, shoving away the blocks of ice which pressed too near them, imperturbably steered the raft in the middle of the rapid current of the Angara.

CHAPTER XI BETWEEN TWO BANKS

BY eight in the evening, the country, as the state of the sky had foretold, was enveloped in complete darkness. The moon being new had not yet risen. From the middle of the river the banks were invisible. The cliffs were confounded with the heavy, low-hanging clouds. At intervals a puff of wind came from the east, but it soon died away in the narrow valley of the Angara.

The darkness could not fail to favor in a considerable degree the plans of the fugitives. Indeed, although the Tartar outposts must have been drawn up on both banks, the raft had a good chance of passing unperceived. It was not likely either that the besiegers would have barred the river above Irkutsk, since they knew that the Russians could not expect any help from the south of the province. Besides this, before long Nature would herself establish a barrier, by cementing with frost the blocks of ice accumulated between the two banks.

Perfect silence now reigned on board the raft. The voices of the pilgrims were no longer heard. They still prayed, but their prayer was but a murmur, which could not reach as far as either bank. The fugitives lay flat on the platform, so that the raft was scarcely above the level of the water. The old boatman crouched down forward among his men, solely occupied in keeping off the ice blocks, a maneuver which was performed without noise.

The drifting of the ice was a favorable circumstance so long as it did not offer an insurmountable obstacle to the passage of the raft. If that object had been alone on the water, it would have run a risk of being seen, even in the darkness, but, as it was, it was confounded with these moving masses, of all shapes and sizes, and the tumult caused by the crashing of the blocks against each other concealed likewise any suspicious noises.

There was a sharp frost. The fugitives suffered cruelly, having no other shelter than a few branches of birch. They cowered down together, endeavoring to keep each other warm, the temperature being now ten degrees below freezing point. The wind, though slight, having passed over the snow-clad mountains of the east, pierced them through and through.

Michael and Nadia, lying in the afterpart of the raft, bore this increase of suffering without complaint. Jolivet and Blount, placed near them, stood these first assaults of the Siberian winter as well as they could. No one now spoke, even in a low voice. Their situation entirely absorbed them. At any moment an incident might occur, which they could not escape unscathed.

For a man who hoped soon to accomplish his mission, Michael was singularly calm. Even in the gravest conjunctures, his energy had never abandoned him. He already saw the moment when he would be at last allowed to think of his mother, of Nadia, of himself! He now only

dreaded one final unhappy chance; this was, that the raft might be completely barred by ice before reaching Irkutsk. He thought but of this, determined beforehand, if necessary, to attempt some bold stroke.

Restored by a few hours' rest, Nadia had regained the physical energy which misery had sometimes overcome, although without ever having shaken her moral energy. She thought, too, that if Michael had to make any fresh effort to attain his end, she must be there to guide him. But in proportion as she drew nearer to Irkutsk, the image of her father rose more and more clearly before her mind. She saw him in the invested town, far from those he loved, but, as she never doubted, struggling against the invaders with all the spirit of his patriotism. In a few hours, if Heaven favored them, she would be in his arms, giving him her mother's last words, and nothing should ever separate them again. If the term of Wassili Fedor's exile should never come to an end, his daughter would remain exiled with him. Then, by a natural transition, she came back to him who would have enabled her to see her father once more, to that generous companion, that "brother," who, the Tartars driven back, would retake the road to Moscow, whom she would perhaps never meet again!

As to Alcide Jolivet and Harry Blount, they had one and the same thought, which was, that the situation was extremely dramatic, and that, well worked up, it would furnish a most deeply interesting article. The Englishman thought of the readers of the Daily Telegraph, and the Frenchman of those of his Cousin Madeleine. At heart, both were not without feeling some emotion.

"Well, so much the better!" thought Alcide Jolivet, "to move others, one must be moved one's self! I believe there is some celebrated verse on the subject, but hang me if I can recollect it!" And with his well-practiced eyes he endeavored to pierce the gloom of the river.

Every now and then a burst of light dispelling the darkness for a time, exhibited the banks under some fantastic aspect--either a forest on fire, or a still burning village. The Angara was occasionally illuminated from one bank to the other. The blocks of ice formed so many mirrors, which, reflecting the flames on every point and in every color, were whirled along by the caprice of the current. The raft passed unperceived in the midst of these floating masses.

The danger was not at these points.

But a peril of another nature menaced the fugitives. One that they could not foresee, and, above all, one that they could not avoid. Chance discovered it to Alcide Jolivet in this way:--Lying at the right side of the raft, he let his hand hang over into the water. Suddenly he was surprised by the impression made on it by the current. It seemed to be of a slimy consistency, as if it had been made of mineral oil. Alcide, aiding his touch by his sense of smell, could not be mistaken. It was really a layer of liquid naphtha, floating on the surface of the river!

Was the raft really floating on this substance, which is in the highest

degree combustible? Where had this naphtha come from? Was it a natural phenomenon taking place on the surface of the Angara, or was it to serve as an engine of destruction, put in motion by the Tartars? Did they intend to carry conflagration into Irkutsk?

Such were the questions which Alcide asked himself, but he thought it best to make this incident known only to Harry Blount, and they both agreed in not alarming their companions by revealing to them this new danger.

It is known that the soil of Central Asia is like a sponge impregnated with liquid hydrogen. At the port of Bakou, on the Persian frontier, on the Caspian Sea, in Asia Minor, in China, on the Yuen-Kiang, in the Burman Empire, springs of mineral oil rise in thousands to the surface of the ground. It is an "oil country," similar to the one which bears this name in North America.

During certain religious festivals, principally at the port of Bakou, the natives, who are fire-worshipers, throw liquid naphtha on the surface of the sea, which buoys it up, its density being inferior to that of water. Then at nightfall, when a layer of mineral oil is thus spread over the Caspian, they light it, and exhibit the matchless spectacle of an ocean of fire undulating and breaking into waves under the breeze.

But what is only a sign of rejoicing at Bakou, might prove a fearful

disaster on the waters of the Angara. Whether it was set on fire by malevolence or imprudence, in the twinkling of an eye a conflagration might spread beyond Irkutsk. On board the raft no imprudence was to be feared; but everything was to be dreaded from the conflagrations on both banks of the Angara, for should a lighted straw or even a spark blow into the water, it would inevitably set the whole current of naphtha in a blaze.

The apprehensions of Jolivet and Blount may be better understood than described. Would it not be prudent, in face of this new danger, to land on one of the banks and wait there? "At any rate," said Alcide, "whatever the danger may be, I know some one who will not land!"

He alluded to Michael Strogoff.

In the meantime, on glided the raft among the masses of ice which were gradually getting closer and closer together. Up till then, no Tartar detachment had been seen, which showed that the raft was not abreast of the outposts. At about ten o'clock, however, Harry Blount caught sight of a number of black objects moving on the ice blocks. Springing from one to the other, they rapidly approached.

"Tartars!" he thought. And creeping up to the old boatman, he pointed out to him the suspicious objects.

The old man looked attentively. "They are only wolves!" said he. "I

like them better than Tartars. But we must defend ourselves, and without noise!"

The fugitives would indeed have to defend themselves against these ferocious beasts, whom hunger and cold had sent roaming through the province. They had smelt out the raft, and would soon attack it. The fugitives must struggle without using firearms, for they could not now be far from the Tartar posts. The women and children were collected in the middle of the raft, and the men, some armed with poles, others with their knives, stood prepared to repulse their assailants. They did not make a sound, but the howls of the wolves filled the air.

Michael did not wish to remain inactive. He lay down at the side attacked by the savage pack. He drew his knife, and every time that a wolf passed within his reach, his hand found out the way to plunge his weapon into its throat. Neither were Jolivet and Blount idle, but fought bravely with the brutes. Their companions gallantly seconded them. The battle was carried on in silence, although many of the fugitives received severe bites.

The struggle did not appear as if it would soon terminate. The pack was being continually reinforced from the right bank of the Angara. "This will never be finished!" said Alcide, brandishing his dagger, red with blood.

In fact, half an hour after the commencement of the attack, the wolves

were still coming in hundreds across the ice. The exhausted fugitives were getting weaker. The fight was going against them. At that moment, a group of ten huge wolves, raging with hunger, their eyes glowing in the darkness like red coals, sprang onto the raft. Jolivet and his companion threw themselves into the midst of the fierce beasts, and Michael was finding his way towards them, when a sudden change took place.

In a few moments the wolves had deserted not only the raft, but also the ice on the river. All the black bodies dispersed, and it was soon certain that they had in all haste regained the shore. Wolves, like other beasts of prey, require darkness for their proceedings, and at that moment a bright light illuminated the entire river.

It was the blaze of an immense fire. The whole of the small town of Poshkavsk was burning. The Tartars were indeed there, finishing their work. From this point, they occupied both banks beyond Irkutsk. The fugitives had by this time reached the dangerous part of their voyage, and they were still twenty miles from the capital.

It was now half past eleven. The raft continued to glide on amongst the ice, with which it was quite mingled, but gleams of light sometimes fell upon it. The fugitives stretched on the platform did not permit themselves to make a movement by which they might be betrayed.

The conflagration was going on with frightful rapidity. The houses, built of fir-wood, blazed like torches--a hundred and fifty flaming

at once. With the crackling of the fire was mingled the yells of the Tartars. The old boatman, getting a foothold on a near piece of ice, managed to shove the raft towards the right bank, by doing which a distance of from three to four hundred feet divided it from the flames of Poshkavsk.

Nevertheless, the fugitives, lighted every now and then by the glare, would have been undoubtedly perceived had not the incendiaries been too much occupied in their work of destruction.

It may be imagined what were the apprehensions of Jolivet and Blount, when they thought of the combustible liquid on which the raft floated. Sparks flew in millions from the houses, which resembled so many glowing furnaces. They rose among the volumes of smoke to a height of five or six hundred feet. On the right bank, the trees and cliffs exposed to the fire looked as if they likewise were burning. A spark falling on the surface of the Angara would be sufficient to spread the flames along the current, and to carry disaster from one bank to the other. The result of this would be in a short time the destruction of the raft and of all those which it carried.

But, happily, the breeze did not blow from that side. It came from the east, and drove the flames towards the left. It was just possible that the fugitives would escape this danger. The blazing town was at last passed. Little by little the glare grew dimmer, the crackling became fainter, and the flames at last disappeared behind the high cliffs which

arose at an abrupt turn of the river.

By this time it was nearly midnight. The deep gloom again threw its protecting shadows over the raft. The Tartars were there, going to and fro near the river. They could not be seen, but they could be heard. The fires of the outposts burned brightly.

In the meantime it had become necessary to steer more carefully among the blocks of ice. The old boatman stood up, and the moujiks resumed their poles. They had plenty of work, the management of the raft becoming more and more difficult as the river was further obstructed.

Michael had crept forward; Jolivet followed; both listened to what the old boatman and his men were saying.

"Look out on the right!"

"There are blocks drifting on to us on the left!"

"Fend! fend off with your boat-hook!"

"Before an hour is past we shall be stopped!"

"If it is God's will!" answered the old man. "Against His will there is nothing to be done."

"You hear them," said Alcide.

"Yes," replied Michael, "but God is with us!"

The situation became more and more serious. Should the raft be stopped, not only would the fugitives not reach Irkutsk, but they would be obliged to leave their floating platform, for it would be very soon smashed to pieces in the ice. The osier ropes would break, the fir trunks torn asunder would drift under the hard crust, and the unhappy people would have no refuge but the ice blocks themselves. Then, when day came, they would be seen by the Tartars, and massacred without mercy!

Michael returned to the spot where Nadia was waiting for him. He approached the girl, took her hand, and put to her the invariable question: "Nadia, are you ready?" to which she replied as usual, "I am ready!"

For a few versts more the raft continued to drift amongst the floating ice. Should the river narrow, it would soon form an impassable barrier. Already they seemed to drift slower. Every moment they encountered severe shocks or were compelled to make detours; now, to avoid running foul of a block, there to enter a channel, of which it was necessary to take advantage. At length the stoppages became still more alarming. There were only a few more hours of night. Could the fugitives not reach Irkutsk by five o'clock in the morning, they must lose all hope of ever

getting there at all.

At half-past one, notwithstanding all efforts, the raft came up against a thick barrier and stuck fast. The ice, which was drifting down behind it, pressed it still closer, and kept it motionless, as though it had been stranded.

At this spot the Angara narrowed, it being half its usual breadth. This was the cause of the accumulation of ice, which became gradually soldered together, under the double influence of the increased pressure and of the cold. Five hundred feet beyond, the river widened again, and the blocks, gradually detaching themselves from the floe, continued to drift towards Irkutsk. It was probable that had the banks not narrowed, the barrier would not have formed. But the misfortune was irreparable, and the fugitives must give up all hope of attaining their object.

Had they possessed the tools usually employed by whalers to cut channels through the ice-fields--had they been able to get through to where the river widened--they might have been saved. But they had nothing which could make the least incision in the ice, hard as granite in the excessive frost. What were they to do?

At that moment several shots on the right bank startled the unhappy fugitives. A shower of balls fell on the raft. The devoted passengers had been seen. Immediately afterwards shots were heard fired from the left bank. The fugitives, taken between two fires, became the mark of

the Tartar sharpshooters. Several were wounded, although in the darkness it was only by chance that they were hit.

"Come, Nadia," whispered Michael in the girl's ear.

Without making a single remark, "ready for anything," Nadia took Michael's hand.

"We must cross the barrier," he said in a low tone. "Guide me, but let no one see us leave the raft."

Nadia obeyed. Michael and she glided rapidly over the floe in the obscurity, only broken now and again by the flashes from the muskets. Nadia crept along in front of Michael. The shot fell around them like a tempest of hail, and pattered on the ice. Their hands were soon covered with blood from the sharp and rugged ice over which they clambered, but still on they went.

In ten minutes, the other side of the barrier was reached. There the waters of the Angara again flowed freely. Several pieces of ice, detached gradually from the floe, were swept along in the current down towards the town. Nadia guessed what Michael wished to attempt. One of the blocks was only held on by a narrow strip.

"Come," said Nadia. And the two crouched on the piece of ice, which their weight detached from the floe.

It began to drift. The river widened, the way was open. Michael and Nadia heard the shots, the cries of distress, the yells of the Tartars. Then, little by little, the sounds of agony and of ferocious joy grew faint in the distance.

"Our poor companions!" murmured Nadia.

For half an hour the current hurried along the block of ice which bore Michael and Nadia. They feared every moment that it would give way beneath them. Swept along in the middle of the current, it was unnecessary to give it an oblique direction until they drew near the quays of Irkutsk. Michael, his teeth tight set, his ear on the strain, did not utter a word. Never had he been so near his object. He felt that he was about to attain it!

Towards two in the morning a double row of lights glittered on the dark horizon in which were confounded the two banks of the Angara. On the right hand were the lights of Irkutsk; on the left, the fires of the Tartar camp.

Michael Strogoff was not more than half a verst from the town. "At last!" he murmured.

But suddenly Nadia uttered a cry.

At the cry Michael stood up on the ice, which was wavering. His hand was extended up the Angara. His face, on which a bluish light cast a peculiar hue, became almost fearful to look at, and then, as if his eyes had been opened to the bright blaze spreading across the river, "Ah!" he exclaimed, "then Heaven itself is against us!"

CHAPTER XII IRKUTSK

IRKUTSK, the capital of Eastern Siberia, is a populous town, containing, in ordinary times, thirty thousand inhabitants. On the right side of the Angara rises a hill, on which are built numerous churches, a lofty cathedral, and dwellings disposed in picturesque disorder.

Seen at a distance, from the top of the mountain which rises at about twenty versts off along the Siberian highroad, this town, with its cupolas, its bell-towers, its steeples slender as minarets, its domes like pot-bellied Chinese jars, presents something of an oriental aspect. But this similarity vanishes as the traveler enters.

The town, half Byzantine, half Chinese, becomes European as soon as he sees its macadamized roads, bordered with pavements, traversed by canals, planted with gigantic birches, its houses of brick and wood, some of which have several stories, the numerous equipages which drive along, not only tarantasses but broughams and coaches; lastly, its numerous inhabitants far advanced in civilization, to whom the latest Paris fashions are not unknown.

Being the refuge for all the Siberians of the province, Irkutsk was at this time very full. Stores of every kind had been collected in abundance. Irkutsk is the emporium of the innumerable kinds of merchandise which are exchanged between China, Central Asia, and Europe. The authorities had therefore no fear with regard to admitting the

peasants of the valley of the Angara, and leaving a desert between the invaders and the town.

Irkutsk is the residence of the governor-general of Eastern Siberia. Below him acts a civil governor, in whose hands is the administration of the province; a head of police, who has much to do in a town where exiles abound; and, lastly, a mayor, chief of the merchants, and a person of some importance, from his immense fortune and the influence which he exercises over the people.

The garrison of Irkutsk was at that time composed of an infantry regiment of Cossacks, consisting of two thousand men, and a body of police wearing helmets and blue uniforms laced with silver. Besides, as has been said, in consequence of the events which had occurred, the brother of the Czar had been shut up in the town since the beginning of the invasion.

A journey of political importance had taken the Grand Duke to these distant provinces of Central Asia. After passing through the principal Siberian cities, the Grand Duke, who traveled en militaire rather than en prince, without any parade, accompanied by his officers, and escorted by a regiment of Cossacks, arrived in the Trans-Baikalcine provinces. Nikolaevsk, the last Russian town situated on the shore of the Sea of Okhotsk, had been honored by a visit from him. Arrived on the confines of the immense Muscovite Empire, the Grand Duke was returning towards Irkutsk, from which place he intended to retake the road to Moscow,

when, sudden as a thunder clap, came the news of the invasion.

He hastened to the capital, but only reached it just before communication with Russia had been interrupted. There was time to receive only a few telegrams from St. Petersburg and Moscow, and with difficulty to answer them before the wire was cut. Irkutsk was isolated from the rest of the world.

The Grand Duke had now only to prepare for resistance, and this he did with that determination and coolness of which, under other circumstances, he had given incontestable proofs. The news of the taking of Ichim, Omsk, and Tomsk, successively reached Irkutsk. It was necessary at any price to save the capital of Siberia. Reinforcements could not be expected for some time. The few troops scattered about in the provinces of Siberia could not arrive in sufficiently large numbers to arrest the progress of the Tartar columns. Since therefore it was impossible for Irkutsk to escape attack, the most important thing to be done was to put the town in a state to sustain a siege of some duration.

The preparations were begun on the day Tomsk fell into the hands of the Tartars. At the same time with this last news, the Grand Duke heard that the Emir of Bokhara and the allied Khans were directing the invasion in person, but what he did not know was, that the lieutenant of these barbarous chiefs was Ivan Ogareff, a Russian officer whom he had himself reduced to the ranks, but with whose person he was not acquainted.

First of all, as we have seen, the inhabitants of the province of Irkutsk were compelled to abandon the towns and villages. Those who did not take refuge in the capital had to retire beyond Lake Baikal, a district to which the invasion would probably not extend its ravages. The harvests of corn and fodder were collected and stored up in the town, and Irkutsk, the last bulwark of the Muscovite power in the Far East, was put in a condition to resist the enemy for a lengthened period.

Irkutsk, founded in 1611, is situated at the confluence of the Irkut and the Angara, on the right bank of the latter river. Two wooden draw-bridges, built on piles, connected the town with its suburbs on the left bank. On this side, defence was easy. The suburbs were abandoned, the bridges destroyed. The Angara being here very wide, it would not be possible to pass it under the fire of the besieged.

But the river might be crossed both above and below the town, and consequently, Irkutsk ran a risk of being attacked on its east side, on which there was no wall to protect it.

The whole population were immediately set to work on the fortifications. They labored day and night. The Grand Duke observed with satisfaction the zeal exhibited by the people in the work, whom ere long he would find equally courageous in the defense. Soldiers, merchants, exiles, peasants, all devoted themselves to the common safety. A week before the Tartars appeared on the Angara, earth-works had been raised. A fosse,

flooded by the waters of the Angara, was dug between the scarp and counterscarp. The town could not now be taken by a coup de main. It must be invested and besieged.

The third Tartar column--the one which came up the valley of the Yenisei on the 24th of September--appeared in sight of Irkutsk. It immediately occupied the deserted suburbs, every building in which had been destroyed so as not to impede the fire of the Grand Duke's guns, unfortunately but few in number and of small caliber. The Tartar troops as they arrived organized a camp on the bank of the Angara, whilst waiting the arrival of the two other columns, commanded by the Emir and his allies.

The junction of these different bodies was effected on the 25th of September, in the Angara camp, and the whole of the invading army, except the garrisons left in the principal conquered towns, was concentrated under the command of Feofar-Khan.

The passage of the Angara in front of Irkutsk having been regarded by Ogareff as impracticable, a strong body of troops crossed, several versts up the river, by means of bridges formed with boats. The Grand Duke did not attempt to oppose the enemy in their passage. He could only impede, not prevent it, having no field-artillery at his disposal, and he therefore remained in Irkutsk.

The Tartars now occupied the right bank of the river; then, advancing

towards the town, they burnt, in passing, the summer-house of the governor-general, and at last having entirely invested Irkutsk, took up their positions for the siege.

Ivan Ogareff, who was a clever engineer, was perfectly competent to direct a regular siege; but he did not possess the materials for operating rapidly. He was disappointed too in the chief object of all his efforts--the surprise of Irkutsk. Things had not turned out as he hoped. First, the march of the Tartar army was delayed by the battle of Tomsk; and secondly, the preparations for the defense were made far more rapidly than he had supposed possible; these two things had balked his plans. He was now under the necessity of instituting a regular siege of the town.

However, by his suggestion, the Emir twice attempted the capture of the place, at the cost of a large sacrifice of men. He threw soldiers on the earth-works which presented any weak point; but these two assaults were repulsed with the greatest courage. The Grand Duke and his officers did not spare themselves on this occasion. They appeared in person; they led the civil population to the ramparts. Citizens and peasants both did their duty.

At the second attack, the Tartars managed to force one of the gates. A fight took place at the head of Bolchaia Street, two versts long, on the banks of the Angara. But the Cossacks, the police, the citizens, united in so fierce a resistance that the Tartars were driven out.

Ivan Ogareff then thought of obtaining by stratagem what he could not gain by force. We have said that his plan was to penetrate into the town, make his way to the Grand Duke, gain his confidence, and, when the time came, give up the gates to the besiegers; and, that done, wreak his vengeance on the brother of the Czar. The Tsigane Sangarre, who had accompanied him to the Angara, urged him to put this plan in execution.

Indeed, it was necessary to act without delay. The Russian troops from the government of Yakutsk were advancing towards Irkutsk. They had concentrated along the upper course of the Lena. In six days they would arrive. Therefore, before six days had passed, Irkutsk must be betrayed. Ogareff hesitated no longer.

One evening, the 2d of October, a council of war was held in the grand saloon of the palace of the governor-general. This palace, standing at the end of Bolchaia Street, overlooked the river. From its windows could be seen the camp of the Tartars, and had the invaders possessed guns of wider range, they would have rendered the palace uninhabitable.

The Grand Duke, General Voranzoff, the governor of the town, and the chief of the merchants, with several officers, had collected to determine upon various proposals.

"Gentlemen," said the Grand Duke, "you know our situation exactly. I have the firm hope that we shall be able to hold out until the arrival

of the Yakutsk troops. We shall then be able to drive off these barbarian hordes, and it will not be my fault if they do not pay dearly for this invasion of the Muscovite territory."

"Your Highness knows that all the population of Irkutsk may be relied on," said General Voranzoff.

"Yes, general," replied the Grand Duke, "and I do justice to their patriotism. Thanks to God, they have not yet been subjected to the horrors of epidemic and famine, and I have reason to hope that they will escape them; but I cannot admire their courage on the ramparts enough. You hear my words, Sir Merchant, and I beg you to repeat such to them."

"I thank your Highness in the name of the town," answered the merchant chief. "May I ask you what is the most distant date when we may expect the relieving army?"

"Six days at most, sir," replied the Grand Duke. "A brave and clever messenger managed this morning to get into the town, and he told me that fifty thousand Russians under General Kisselef, are advancing by forced marches. Two days ago, they were on the banks of the Lena, at Kirensk, and now, neither frost nor snow will keep them back. Fifty thousand good men, taking the Tartars on the flank, will soon set us free."

"I will add," said the chief of the merchants, "that we shall be ready to execute your orders, any day that your Highness may command a

sortie."

"Good, sir," replied the Grand Duke. "Wait till the heads of the relieving columns appear on the heights, and we will speedily crush these invaders."

Then turning to General Voranzoff, "To-morrow," said he, "we will visit the works on the right bank. Ice is drifting down the Angara, which will not be long in freezing, and in that case the Tartars might perhaps cross."

"Will your Highness allow me to make an observation?" said the chief of the merchants.

"Do so, sir."

"I have more than once seen the temperature fall to thirty and forty degrees below zero, and the Angara has still carried down drifting ice without entirely freezing. This is no doubt owing to the swiftness of its current. If therefore the Tartars have no other means of crossing the river, I can assure your Highness that they will not enter Irkutsk in that way."

The governor-general confirmed this assertion.

"It is a fortunate circumstance," responded the Grand Duke.

"Nevertheless, we must hold ourselves ready for any emergency."

He then, turning towards the head of the police, asked, "Have you nothing to say to me, sir?"

"I have your Highness," answered the head of police, "a petition which is addressed to you through me."

"Addressed by whom?"

"By the Siberian exiles, whom, as your Highness knows, are in the town to the number of five hundred."

The political exiles, distributed over the province, had been collected in Irkutsk, from the beginning of the invasion. They had obeyed the order to rally in the town, and leave the villages where they exercised their different professions, some doctors, some professors, either at the Gymnasium, or at the Japanese School, or at the School of Navigation. The Grand Duke, trusting like the Czar in their patriotism, had armed them, and they had thoroughly proved their bravery.

"What do the exiles ask?" said the Grand Duke.

"They ask the consent of your Highness," answered the head of police, "to their forming a special corps and being placed in the front of the first sortie."

"Yes," replied the Grand Duke with an emotion which he did not seek to hide, "these exiles are Russians, and it is their right to fight for their country!"

"I believe I may assure your Highness," said the governor-general, "you will have no better soldiers."

"But they must have a chief," said the Grand Duke, "who will he be?"

"They wish to recommend to your Highness," said the head of police, "one of their number, who has distinguished himself on several occasions."

"Is he a Russian?"

"Yes, a Russian from the Baltic provinces."

"His name?"

"Is Wassili Fedor."

This exile was Nadia's father. Wassili Fedor, as we have already said, followed his profession of a medical man in Irkutsk. He was clever and charitable, and also possessed the greatest courage and most sincere patriotism. All the time which he did not devote to the sick he employed in organizing the defense. It was he who had united his companions

in exile in the common cause. The exiles, till then mingled with the population, had behaved in such a way as to draw on themselves the attention of the Grand Duke. In several sorties, they had paid with their blood their debt to holy Russia--holy as they believe, and adored by her children! Wassili Fedor had behaved heroically; his name had been mentioned several times, but he never asked either thanks or favors, and when the exiles of Irkutsk thought of forming themselves into a special corps, he was ignorant of their intention of choosing him for their captain.

When the head of police mentioned this name, the Grand Duke answered that it was not unknown to him.

"Indeed," remarked General Voranzoff, "Wassili Fedor is a man of worth and courage. His influence over his companions has always been very great."

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

"For two years."

"And his conduct?"

"His conduct," answered the head of police, "is that of a man obedient to the special laws which govern him."

"General," said the Grand Duke, "General, be good enough to present him to me immediately."

The orders of the Grand Duke were obeyed, and before half an hour had passed, Fedor was introduced into his presence. He was a man over forty, tall, of a stern and sad countenance. One felt that his whole life was summed up in a single word--strife--he had striven and suffered. His features bore a marked resemblance to those of his daughter, Nadia Fedor.

This Tartar invasion had severely wounded him in his tenderest affections, and ruined the hope of the father, exiled eight thousand versts from his native town. A letter had apprised him of the death of his wife, and at the same time of the departure of his daughter, who had obtained from the government an authorization to join him at Irkutsk. Nadia must have left Riga on the 10th of July. The invasion had begun on the 15th of July; if at that time Nadia had passed the frontier, what could have become of her in the midst of the invaders? The anxiety of the unhappy father may be supposed when, from that time, he had no further news of his daughter.

Wassili Fedor entered the presence of the Grand Duke, bowed, and waited to be questioned.

"Wassili Fedor," said the Grand Duke, "your companions in exile have asked to be allowed to form a select corps. They are not ignorant that

in this corps they must make up their minds to be killed to the last man?"

"They are not ignorant of it," replied Fedor.

"They wish to have you for their captain."

"I, your Highness?"

"Do you consent to be placed at their head?"

"Yes, if it is for the good of Russia."

"Captain Fedor," said the Grand Duke, "you are no longer an exile."

"Thanks, your Highness, but can I command those who are so still?"

"They are so no longer!" The brother of the Czar had granted a pardon to all Fedor's companions in exile, now his companions in arms!

Wassili Fedor wrung, with emotion, the hand which the Grand Duke held out to him, and retired.

The latter, turned to his officers, "The Czar will not refuse to ratify that pardon," said he, smiling; "we need heroes to defend the capital of Siberia, and I have just made some."

This pardon, so generously accorded to the exiles of Irkutsk, was indeed an act of real justice and sound policy.

It was now night. Through the windows of the palace burned the fires of the Tartar camp, flickering beyond the Angara. Down the river drifted numerous blocks of ice, some of which stuck on the piles of the old bridges; others were swept along by the current with great rapidity. It was evident, as the merchant had observed, that it would be very difficult for the Angara to freeze all over. The defenders of Irkutsk had not to dread being attacked on that side. Ten o'clock had just struck. The Grand Duke was about to dismiss his officers and retire to his apartments, when a tumult was heard outside the palace.

Almost immediately the door was thrown open, an aide-de-camp appeared, and advanced rapidly towards the Grand Duke.

"Your Highness," said he, "a courier from the Czar!"

CHAPTER XIII THE CZAR'S COURIER

ALL the members of the council simultaneously started forward. A courier from the Czar arrived in Irkutsk! Had these officers for a moment considered the improbability of this fact, they would certainly not have credited what they heard.

The Grand Duke advanced quickly to his aide-de-camp. "This courier!" he exclaimed.

A man entered. He appeared exhausted with fatigue. He wore the dress of a Siberian peasant, worn into tatters, and exhibiting several shot-holes. A Muscovite cap was on his head. His face was disfigured by a recently-healed scar. The man had evidently had a long and painful journey; his shoes being in a state which showed that he had been obliged to make part of it on foot.

"His Highness the Grand Duke?" he asked.

The Grand Duke went up to him. "You are a courier from the Czar?" he asked.

"Yes, your Highness."

"You come?"

"From Moscow."

"You left Moscow?"

"On the 15th of July."

"Your name?"

"Michael Strogoff."

It was Ivan Ogareff. He had taken the designation of the man whom he believed that he had rendered powerless. Neither the Grand Duke nor anyone knew him in Irkutsk, and he had not even to disguise his features. As he was in a position to prove his pretended identity, no one could have any reason for doubting him. He came, therefore, sustained by his iron will, to hasten by treason and assassination the great object of the invasion.

After Ogareff had replied, the Grand Duke signed to all his officers to withdraw. He and the false Michael Strogoff remained alone in the saloon.

The Grand Duke looked at Ivan Ogareff for some moments with extreme attention. Then he said, "On the 15th of July you were at Moscow?"

"Yes, your Highness; and on the night of the 14th I saw His Majesty the

Czar at the New Palace."

"Have you a letter from the Czar?"

"Here it is."

And Ivan Ogareff handed to the Grand Duke the Imperial letter, crumpled to almost microscopic size.

"Was the letter given you in this state?"

"No, your Highness, but I was obliged to tear the envelope, the better to hide it from the Emir's soldiers."

"Were you taken prisoner by the Tartars?"

"Yes, your Highness, I was their prisoner for several days," answered Ogareff. "That is the reason that, having left Moscow on the 15th of July, as the date of that letter shows, I only reached Irkutsk on the 2d of October, after traveling seventy-nine days."

The Grand Duke took the letter. He unfolded it and recognized the Czar's signature, preceded by the decisive formula, written by his brother's hand. There was no possible doubt of the authenticity of this letter, nor of the identity of the courier. Though Ogareff's countenance had at first inspired the Grand Duke with some distrust, he let nothing of it

appear, and it soon vanished.

The Grand Duke remained for a few minutes without speaking. He read the letter slowly, so as to take in its meaning fully. "Michael Strogoff, do you know the contents of this letter?" he asked.

"Yes, your Highness. I might have been obliged to destroy it, to prevent its falling into the hands of the Tartars, and should such have been the case, I wished to be able to bring the contents of it to your Highness."

"You know that this letter enjoins us all to die, rather than give up the town?"

"I know it."

"You know also that it informs me of the movements of the troops which have combined to stop the invasion?"

"Yes, your Highness, but the movements have failed."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Ichim, Omsk, Tomsk, to speak only of the more important towns of the two Siberias, have been successively occupied by the soldiers of Feofar-Khan."

"But there has been fighting? Have not our Cossacks met the Tartars?"

"Several times, your Highness."

"And they were repulsed?"

"They were not in sufficient force to oppose the enemy."

"Where did the encounters take place?"

"At Kolyvan, at Tomsk." Until now, Ogareff had only spoken the truth, but, in the hope of troubling the defenders of Irkutsk by exaggerating the defeats, he added, "And a third time before Krasnoiarsk."

"And what of this last engagement?" asked the Grand Duke, through whose compressed lips the words could scarcely pass.

"It was more than an engagement, your Highness," answered Ogareff; "it was a battle."

"A battle?"

"Twenty thousand Russians, from the frontier provinces and the government of Tobolsk, engaged with a hundred and fifty thousand Tartars, and, notwithstanding their courage, were overwhelmed."

"You lie!" exclaimed the Grand Duke, endeavoring in vain to curb his passion.

"I speak the truth, your Highness," replied Ivan Ogareff coldly. "I was present at the battle of Krasnoiarsk, and it was there I was made prisoner!"

The Grand Duke grew calmer, and by a significant gesture he gave Ogareff to understand that he did not doubt his veracity. "What day did this battle of Krasnoiarsk take place?" he asked.

"On the 2d of September."

"And now all the Tartar troops are concentrated here?"

"All."

"And you estimate them?"

"At about four hundred thousand men."

Another exaggeration of Ogareff's in the estimate of the Tartar army, with the same object as before.

"And I must not expect any help from the West provinces?" asked the Grand Duke.

"None, your Highness, at any rate before the end of the winter."

"Well, hear this, Michael Strogoff. Though I must expect no help either from the East or from the West, even were these barbarians six hundred thousand strong, I will never give up Irkutsk!"

Ogareff's evil eye slightly contracted. The traitor thought to himself that the brother of the Czar did not reckon the result of treason.

The Grand Duke, who was of a nervous temperament, had great difficulty in keeping calm whilst hearing this disastrous news. He walked to and fro in the room, under the gaze of Ogareff, who eyed him as a victim reserved for vengeance. He stopped at the windows, he looked forth at the fires in the Tartar camp, he listened to the noise of the ice-blocks drifting down the Angara.

A quarter of an hour passed without his putting any more questions. Then taking up the letter, he re-read a passage and said, "You know that in this letter I am warned of a traitor, of whom I must beware?"

"Yes, your Highness."

"He will try to enter Irkutsk in disguise; gain my confidence, and betray the town to the Tartars."

"I know all that, your Highness, and I know also that Ivan Ogareff has sworn to revenge himself personally on the Czar's brother."

"Why?"

"It is said that the officer in question was condemned by the Grand Duke to a humiliating degradation."

"Yes, I remember. But it is a proof that the villain, who could afterwards serve against his country and head an invasion of barbarians, deserved it."

"His Majesty the Czar," said Ogareff, "was particularly anxious that you should be warned of the criminal projects of Ivan Ogareff against your person."

"Yes; of that the letter informs me."

"And His Majesty himself spoke to me of it, telling me I was above all things to beware of the traitor."

"Did you meet with him?"

"Yes, your Highness, after the battle of Krasnoiarsk. If he had only guessed that I was the bearer of a letter addressed to your Highness, in which his plans were revealed, I should not have got off so easily."

"No; you would have been lost!" replied the Grand Duke. "And how did you manage to escape?"

"By throwing myself into the Irtych."

"And how did you enter Irkutsk?"

"Under cover of a sortie, which was made this evening to repulse a Tartar detachment. I mingled with the defenders of the town, made myself known, and was immediately conducted before your Highness."

"Good, Michael Strogoff," answered the Grand Duke. "You have shown courage and zeal in your difficult mission. I will not forget you. Have you any favor to ask?"

"None; unless it is to be allowed to fight at the side of your Highness," replied Ogareff.

"So be it, Strogoff. I attach you from to-day to my person, and you shall be lodged in the palace."

"And if according to his intention, Ivan Ogareff should present himself to your Highness under a false name?"

"We will unmask him, thanks to you, who know him, and I will make him

die under the knout. Go!"

Ogareff gave a military salute, not forgetting that he was a captain of the couriers of the Czar, and retired.

Ogareff had so far played his unworthy part with success. The Grand Duke's entire confidence had been accorded him. He could now betray it whenever it suited him. He would inhabit the very palace. He would be in the secret of all the operations for the defense of the town. He thus held the situation in his hand, as it were. No one in Irkutsk knew him, no one could snatch off his mask. He resolved therefore to set to work without delay.

Indeed, time pressed. The town must be captured before the arrival of the Russians from the North and East, and that was only a question of a few days. The Tartars once masters of Irkutsk, it would not be easy to take it again from them. At any rate, even if they were obliged to abandon it later, they would not do so before they had utterly destroyed it, and before the head of the Grand Duke had rolled at the feet of Feofar-Khan.

Ivan Ogareff, having every facility for seeing, observing, and acting, occupied himself the next day with visiting the ramparts. He was everywhere received with cordial congratulations from officers, soldiers, and citizens. To them this courier from the Czar was a link which connected them with the empire.

Ogareff recounted, with an assurance which never failed, numerous fictitious events of his journey. Then, with the cunning for which he was noted, without dwelling too much on it at first, he spoke of the gravity of the situation, exaggerating the success of the Tartars and the numbers of the barbarian forces, as he had when speaking to the Grand Duke. According to him, the expected succors would be insufficient, if ever they arrived at all, and it was to be feared that a battle fought under the walls of Irkutsk would be as fatal as the battles of Kolyvan, Tomsk, and Krasnoiarsk.

Ogareff was not too free in these insinuations. He wished to allow them to sink gradually into the minds of the defenders of Irkutsk. He pretended only to answer with reluctance when much pressed with questions. He always added that they must fight to the last man, and blow up the town rather than yield!

These false statements would have done more harm had it been possible; but the garrison and the population of Irkutsk were too patriotic to let themselves be moved. Of all the soldiers and citizens shut up in this town, isolated at the extremity of the Asiatic world, not one dreamed of even speaking of a capitulation. The contempt of the Russians for these barbarians was boundless.

No one suspected the odious part played by Ivan Ogareff; no one guessed that the pretended courier of the Czar was a traitor. It occurred very

naturally that on his arrival in Irkutsk, a frequent intercourse was established between Ogareff and one of the bravest defenders of the town, Wassili Fedor. We know what anxiety this unhappy father suffered. If his daughter, Nadia Fedor, had left Russia on the date fixed by the last letter he had received from Riga, what had become of her? Was she still trying to cross the invaded provinces, or had she long since been taken prisoner? The only alleviation to Wassili Fedor's anxiety was when he could obtain an opportunity of engaging in battle with the Tartars--opportunities which came too seldom for his taste. The very evening the pretended courier arrived, Wassili Fedor went to the governor-general's palace and, acquainting Ogareff with the circumstances under which his daughter must have left European Russia, told him all his uneasiness about her. Ogareff did not know Nadia, although he had met her at Ichim on the day she was there with Michael Strogoff; but then, he had not paid more attention to her than to the two reporters, who at the same time were in the post-house; he therefore could give Wassili Fedor no news of his daughter.

"But at what time," asked Ogareff, "must your daughter have left the Russian territory?"

"About the same time that you did," replied Fedor.

"I left Moscow on the 15th of July."

"Nadia must also have quitted Moscow at that time. Her letter told me so

expressly."

"She was in Moscow on the 15th of July?"

"Yes, certainly, by that date."

"Then it was impossible for her--But no, I am mistaken--I was confusing dates. Unfortunately, it is too probable that your daughter must have passed the frontier, and you can only have one hope, that she stopped on learning the news of the Tartar invasion!"

The father's head fell! He knew Nadia, and he knew too well that nothing would have prevented her from setting out. Ivan Ogareff had just committed gratuitously an act of real cruelty. With a word he might have reassured Fedor. Although Nadia had passed the frontier under circumstances with which we are acquainted, Fedor, by comparing the date on which his daughter would have been at Nijni-Novgorod, and the date of the proclamation which forbade anyone to leave it, would no doubt have concluded thus: that Nadia had not been exposed to the dangers of the invasion, and that she was still, in spite of herself, in the European territory of the Empire.

Ogareff obedient to his nature, a man who was never touched by the sufferings of others, might have said that word. He did not say it. Fedor retired with his heart broken. In that interview his last hope was crushed.

During the two following days, the 3rd and 4th of October, the Grand Duke often spoke to the pretended Michael Strogoff, and made him repeat all that he had heard in the Imperial Cabinet of the New Palace. Ogareff, prepared for all these questions, replied without the least hesitation. He intentionally did not conceal that the Czar's government had been utterly surprised by the invasion, that the insurrection had been prepared in the greatest possible secrecy, that the Tartars were already masters of the line of the Obi when the news reached Moscow, and lastly, that none of the necessary preparations were completed in the Russian provinces for sending into Siberia the troops requisite for repulsing the invaders.

Ivan Ogareff, being entirely free in his movements, began to study Irkutsk, the state of its fortifications, their weak points, so as to profit subsequently by his observations, in the event of being prevented from consummating his act of treason. He examined particularly the Bolchaia Gate, the one he wished to deliver up.

Twice in the evening he came upon the glacis of this gate. He walked up and down, without fear of being discovered by the besiegers, whose nearest posts were at least a mile from the ramparts. He fancied that he was recognized by no one, till he caught sight of a shadow gliding along outside the earthworks. Sangarre had come at the risk of her life for the purpose of putting herself in communication with Ivan Ogareff.

For two days the besieged had enjoyed a tranquillity to which the Tartars had not accustomed them since the commencement of the investment. This was by Ogareff's orders. Feofar-Khan's lieutenant wished that all attempts to take the town by force should be suspended. He hoped the watchfulness of the besieged would relax. At any rate, several thousand Tartars were kept in readiness at the outposts, to attack the gate, deserted, as Ogareff anticipated that it would be, by its defenders, whenever he should summon the besiegers to the assault.

This he could not now delay in doing. All must be over by the time that the Russian troops should come in sight of Irkutsk. Ogareff's arrangements were made, and on this evening a note fell from the top of the earthworks into Sangarre's hands.

On the next day, that is to say during the hours of darkness from the 5th to the 6th of October, at two o'clock in the morning, Ivan Ogareff had resolved to deliver up Irkutsk.

CHAPTER XIV THE NIGHT OF THE FIFTH OF OCTOBER

IVAN OGAREFF'S plan had been contrived with the greatest care, and except for some unforeseen accident he believed that it must succeed. It was of importance that the Bolchaia Gate should be unguarded or only feebly held when he gave it up. The attention of the besieged was therefore to be drawn to another part of the town. A diversion was agreed upon with the Emir.

This diversion was to be effected both up and down the river, on the Irkutsk bank. The attack on these two points was to be conducted in earnest, and at the same time a feigned attempt at crossing the Angara from the left bank was to be made. The Bolchaia Gate, would be probably deserted, so much the more because on this side the Tartar outposts having drawn back, would appear to have broken up.

It was the 5th of October. In four and twenty hours, the capital of Eastern Siberia would be in the hands of the Emir, and the Grand Duke in the power of Ivan Ogareff.

During the day, an unusual stir was going on in the Angara camp. From the windows of the palace important preparations on the opposite shore could be distinctly seen. Numerous Tartar detachments were converging towards the camp, and from hour to hour reinforced the Emir's troops. These movements, intended to deceive the besieged, were conducted in the most open manner possible before their eyes.

Ogareff had warned the Grand Duke that an attack was to be feared. He knew, he said, that an assault was to be made, both above and below the town, and he counselled the Duke to reinforce the two directly threatened points. Accordingly, after a council of war had been held in the palace, orders were issued to concentrate the defense on the bank of the Angara and at the two ends of the town, where the earthworks protected the river.

This was exactly what Ogareff wished. He did not expect that the Bolchaia Gate would be left entirely without defenders, but that there would only be a small number. Besides, Ogareff meant to give such importance to the diversion, that the Grand Duke would be obliged to oppose it with all his available forces. The traitor planned also to produce so frightful a catastrophe that terror must inevitably overwhelm the hearts of the besieged.

All day the garrison and population of Irkutsk were on the alert. The measures to repel an attack on the points hitherto unassailed had been taken. The Grand Duke and General Voranzoff visited the posts, strengthened by their orders. Wassili Fedor's corps occupied the North of the town, but with orders to throw themselves where the danger was greatest. The right bank of the Angara had been protected with the few guns possessed by the defenders. With these measures, taken in time, thanks to the advice so opportunely given by Ivan Ogareff, there was good reason to hope that the expected attack would be repulsed. In

that case the Tartars, momentarily discouraged, would no doubt not make another attempt against the town for several days. Now the troops expected by the Grand Duke might arrive at any hour. The safety or the loss of Irkutsk hung only by a thread.

On this day, the sun which had risen at twenty minutes to six, set at forty minutes past five, having traced its diurnal arc for eleven hours above the horizon. The twilight would struggle with the night for another two hours. Then it would be intensely dark, for the sky was cloudy, and there would be no moon. This gloom would favor the plans of Ivan Ogareff.

For a few days already a sharp frost had given warning of the approaching rigor of the Siberian winter, and this evening it was especially severe. The Russians posted by the bank of the Angara, obliged to conceal their position, lighted no fires. They suffered cruelly from the low temperature. A few feet below them, the ice in large masses drifted down the current. All day these masses had been seen passing rapidly between the two banks.

This had been considered by the Grand Duke and his officers as fortunate. Should the channel of the Angara continue to be thus obstructed, the passage must be impracticable. The Tartars could use neither rafts nor boats. As to their crossing the river on the ice, that was not possible. The newly-frozen plain could not bear the weight of an assaulting column.

This circumstance, as it appeared favorable to the defenders of Irkutsk, Ogareff might have regretted. He did not do so, however. The traitor knew well that the Tartars would not try to pass the Angara, and that, on its side at least, their attempt was only a feint.

About ten in the evening, the state of the river sensibly improved, to the great surprise of the besieged and still more to their disadvantage. The passage till then impracticable, became all at once possible. The bed of the Angara was clear. The blocks of ice, which had for some days drifted past in large numbers, disappeared down the current, and five or six only now occupied the space between the banks. The Russian officers reported this change in the river to the Grand Duke. They suggested that it was probably caused by the circumstance that in some narrower part of the Angara, the blocks had accumulated so as to form a barrier.

We know this was the case. The passage of the Angara was thus open to the besiegers. There was great reason for the Russians to be on their guard.

Up to midnight nothing had occurred. On the Eastern side, beyond the Bolchaia Gate, all was quiet. Not a glimmer was seen in the dense forest, which appeared confounded on the horizon with the masses of clouds hanging low down in the sky. Lights flitting to and fro in the Angara camp, showed that a considerable movement was taking place. From a verst above and below the point where the scarp met the river's bank,

came a dull murmur, proving that the Tartars were on foot, expecting some signal. An hour passed. Nothing new.

The bell of the Irkutsk cathedral was about to strike two o'clock in the morning, and not a movement amongst the besiegers had yet shown that they were about to commence the assault. The Grand Duke and his officers began to suspect that they had been mistaken. Had it really been the Tartars' plan to surprise the town? The preceding nights had not been nearly so quiet--musketry rattling from the outposts, shells whistling through the air; and this time, nothing. The officers waited, ready to give their orders, according to circumstances.

We have said that Ogareff occupied a room in the palace. It was a large chamber on the ground floor, its windows opening on a side terrace. By taking a few steps along this terrace, a view of the river could be obtained.

Profound darkness reigned in the room. Ogareff stood by a window, awaiting the hour to act. The signal, of course, could come from him, alone. This signal once given, when the greater part of the defenders of Irkutsk would be summoned to the points openly attacked, his plan was to leave the palace and hurry to the Bolchaia Gate. If it was unguarded, he would open it; or at least he would direct the overwhelming mass of its assailants against the few defenders.

He now crouched in the shadow, like a wild beast ready to spring on

its prey. A few minutes before two o'clock, the Grand Duke desired that Michael Strogoff--which was the only name they could give to Ivan Ogareff--should be brought to him. An aide-de-camp came to the room, the door of which was closed. He called.

Ogareff, motionless near the window, and invisible in the shade did not answer. The Grand Duke was therefore informed that the Czar's courier was not at that moment in the palace.

Two o'clock struck. Now was the time to cause the diversion agreed upon with the Tartars, waiting for the assault. Ivan Ogareff opened the window and stationed himself at the North angle of the side terrace.

Below him flowed the roaring waters of the Angara. Ogareff took a match from his pocket, struck it and lighted a small bunch of tow, impregnated with priming powder, which he threw into the river.

It was by the orders of Ivan Ogareff that the torrents of mineral oil had been thrown on the surface of the Angara! There are numerous naphtha springs above Irkutsk, on the right bank, between the suburb of Poshkavsk and the town. Ogareff had resolved to employ this terrible means to carry fire into Irkutsk. He therefore took possession of the immense reservoirs which contained the combustible liquid. It was only necessary to demolish a piece of wall in order to allow it to flow out in a vast stream.

This had been done that night, a few hours previously, and this was the reason that the raft which carried the true Courier of the Czar, Nadia, and the fugitives, floated on a current of mineral oil. Through the breaches in these reservoirs of enormous dimensions rushed the naphtha in torrents, and, following the inclination of the ground, it spread over the surface of the river, where its density allowed it to float. This was the way Ivan Ogareff carried on warfare! Allied with Tartars, he acted like a Tartar, and against his own countrymen!

The tow had been thrown on the waters of the Angara. In an instant, with electrical rapidity, as if the current had been of alcohol, the whole river was in a blaze above and below the town. Columns of blue flames ran between the two banks. Volumes of vapor curled up above. The few pieces of ice which still drifted were seized by the burning liquid, and melted like wax on the top of a furnace, the evaporated water escaping in shrill hisses.

At the same moment, firing broke out on the North and South of the town. The enemy's batteries discharged their guns at random. Several thousand Tartars rushed to the assault of the earth-works. The houses on the bank, built of wood, took fire in every direction. A bright light dissipated the darkness of the night.

"At last!" said Ivan Ogareff.

He had good reason for congratulating himself. The diversion which he

had planned was terrible. The defenders of Irkutsk found themselves between the attack of the Tartars and the fearful effects of fire. The bells rang, and all the able-bodied of the population ran, some towards the points attacked, and others towards the houses in the grasp of the flames, which it seemed too probable would ere long envelop the whole town.

The Gate of Bolchaia was nearly free. Only a very small guard had been left there. And by the traitor's suggestion, and in order that the event might be explained apart from him, as if by political hate, this small guard had been chosen from the little band of exiles.

Ogareff re-entered his room, now brilliantly lighted by the flames from the Angara; then he made ready to go out. But scarcely had he opened the door, when a woman rushed into the room, her clothes drenched, her hair in disorder.

"Sangarre!" exclaimed Ogareff, in the first moment of surprise, and not supposing that it could be any other woman than the gypsy.

It was not Sangarre; it was Nadia!

At the moment when, floating on the ice, the girl had uttered a cry on seeing the fire spreading along the current, Michael had seized her in his arms, and plunged with her into the river itself to seek a refuge in its depths from the flames. The block which bore them was not thirty

fathoms from the first quay of Irkutsk.

Swimming beneath the water, Michael managed to get a footing with Nadia on the quay. Michael Strogoff had reached his journey's end! He was in Irkutsk!

"To the governor's palace!" said he to Nadia.

In less than ten minutes, they arrived at the entrance to the palace. Long tongues of flame from the Angara licked its walls, but were powerless to set it on fire. Beyond the houses on the bank were in a blaze.

The palace being open to all, Michael and Nadia entered without difficulty. In the confusion, no one remarked them, although their garments were dripping. A crowd of officers coming for orders, and of soldiers running to execute them, filled the great hall on the ground floor. There, in a sudden eddy of the confused multitude, Michael and the young girl were separated from each other.

Nadia ran distracted through the passages, calling her companion, and asking to be taken to the Grand Duke. A door into a room flooded with light opened before her. She entered, and found herself suddenly face to face with the man whom she had met at Ichim, whom she had seen at Tomsk; face to face with the one whose villainous hand would an instant later betray the town!

"Ivan Ogareff!" she cried.

On hearing his name pronounced, the wretch started. His real name known, all his plans would be balked. There was but one thing to be done: to kill the person who had just uttered it. Ogareff darted at Nadia; but the girl, a knife in her hand, retreated against the wall, determined to defend herself.

"Ivan Ogareff!" again cried Nadia, knowing well that so detested a name would soon bring her help.

"Ah! Be silent!" hissed out the traitor between his clenched teeth.

"Ivan Ogareff!" exclaimed a third time the brave young girl, in a voice to which hate had added ten-fold strength.

Mad with fury, Ogareff, drawing a dagger from his belt, again rushed at Nadia and compelled her to retreat into a corner of the room. Her last hope appeared gone, when the villain, suddenly lifted by an irresistible force, was dashed to the ground.

"Michael!" cried Nadia.

It was Michael Strogoff. Michael had heard Nadia's call. Guided by her voice, he had just in time reached Ivan Ogareff's room, and entered by

the open door.

"Fear nothing, Nadia," said he, placing himself between her and Ogareff.

"Ah!" cried the girl, "take care, brother! The traitor is armed! He can see!"

Ogareff rose, and, thinking he had an immeasurable advantage over the blind man leaped upon him. But with one hand, the blind man grasped the arm of his enemy, seized his weapon, and hurled him again to the ground.

Pale with rage and shame, Ogareff remembered that he wore a sword. He drew it and returned a second time to the charge. A blind man! Ogareff had only to deal with a blind man! He was more than a match for him!

Nadia, terrified at the danger which threatened her companion ran to the door calling for help!

"Close the door, Nadia!" said Michael. "Call no one, and leave me alone! The Czar's courier has nothing to fear to-day from this villain! Let him come on, if he dares! I am ready for him."

In the mean time, Ogareff, gathering himself together like a tiger about to spring, uttered not a word. The noise of his footsteps, his very breathing, he endeavored to conceal from the ear of the blind man. His object was to strike before his opponent was aware of his approach, to

strike him with a deadly blow.

Nadia, terrified and at the same time confident, watched this terrible scene with involuntary admiration. Michael's calm bearing seemed to have inspired her. Michael's sole weapon was his Siberian knife. He did not see his adversary armed with a sword, it is true; but Heaven's support seemed to be afforded him. How, almost without stirring, did he always face the point of the sword?

Ivan Ogareff watched his strange adversary with visible anxiety. His superhuman calm had an effect upon him. In vain, appealing to his reason, did he tell himself that in so unequal a combat all the advantages were on his side. The immobility of the blind man froze him. He had settled on the place where he would strike his victim. He had fixed upon it! What, then, hindered him from putting an end to his blind antagonist?

At last, with a spring he drove his sword full at Michael's breast. An imperceptible movement of the blind man's knife turned aside the blow. Michael had not been touched, and coolly he awaited a second attack.

Cold drops stood on Ogareff's brow. He drew back a step, then again leaped forward. But as had the first, this second attempt failed. The knife had simply parried the blow from the traitor's useless sword.

Mad with rage and terror before this living statue, he gazed into the

wide-open eyes of the blind man. Those eyes which seemed to pierce to the bottom of his soul, and yet which did not, could not, see--exercised a sort of dreadful fascination over him.

All at once, Ogareff uttered a cry. A sudden light flashed across his brain. "He sees!" he exclaimed, "he sees!" And like a wild beast trying to retreat into its den, step by step, terrified, he drew back to the end of the room.

Then the statue became animated, the blind man walked straight up to Ivan Ogareff, and placing himself right before him, "Yes, I see!" said he. "I see the mark of the knout which I gave you, traitor and coward! I see the place where I am about to strike you! Defend your life! It is a duel I deign to offer you! My knife against your sword!"

"He sees!" said Nadia. "Gracious Heaven, is it possible!"

Ogareff felt that he was lost. But mustering all his courage, he sprang forward on his impassible adversary. The two blades crossed, but at a touch from Michael's knife, wielded in the hand of the Siberian hunter, the sword flew in splinters, and the wretch, stabbed to the heart, fell lifeless on the ground.

At the same moment, the door was thrown open. The Grand Duke, accompanied by some of his officers, appeared on the threshold. The Grand Duke advanced. In the body lying on the ground, he recognized the

man whom he believed to be the Czar's courier.

Then, in a threatening voice, "Who killed that man?" he asked.

"I," replied Michael.

One of the officers put a pistol to his temple, ready to fire.

"Your name?" asked the Grand Duke, before giving the order for his brains to be blown out.

"Your Highness," answered Michael, "ask me rather the name of the man who lies at your feet!"

"That man, I know him! He is a servant of my brother! He is the Czar's courier!"

"That man, your Highness, is not a courier of the Czar! He is Ivan Ogareff!"

"Ivan Ogareff!" exclaimed the Grand Duke.

"Yes, Ivan the Traitor!"

"But who are you, then?"

"Michael Strogoff!"

CHAPTER XV CONCLUSION

MICHAEL STROGOFF was not, had never been, blind. A purely human phenomenon, at the same time moral and physical, had neutralized the action of the incandescent blade which Feofar's executioner had passed before his eyes.

It may be remembered, that at the moment of the execution, Marfa Strogoff was present, stretching out her hands towards her son. Michael gazed at her as a son would gaze at his mother, when it is for the last time. The tears, which his pride in vain endeavored to subdue, welling up from his heart, gathered under his eyelids, and volatiliz-ing on the cornea, had saved his sight. The vapor formed by his tears interposing between the glowing saber and his eyeballs, had been sufficient to annihilate the action of the heat. A similar effect is produced, when a workman smelter, after dipping his hand in vapor, can with impunity hold it over a stream of melted iron.

Michael had immediately understood the danger in which he would be placed should he make known his secret to anyone. He at once saw, on the other hand, that he might make use of his supposed blindness for the accomplishment of his designs. Because it was believed that he was blind, he would be allowed to go free. He must therefore be blind, blind to all, even to Nadia, blind everywhere, and not a gesture at any moment must let the truth be suspected. His resolution was taken. He must risk his life even to afford to all he might meet the proof of his want of

sight. We know how perfectly he acted the part he had determined on.

His mother alone knew the truth, and he had whispered it to her in Tomsk itself, when bending over her in the dark he covered her with kisses.

When Ogareff had in his cruel irony held the Imperial letter before the eyes which he believed were destroyed, Michael had been able to read, and had read the letter which disclosed the odious plans of the traitor. This was the reason of the wonderful resolution he exhibited during the second part of his journey. This was the reason of his unalterable longing to reach Irkutsk, so as to perform his mission by word of mouth. He knew that the town would be betrayed! He knew that the life of the Grand Duke was threatened! The safety of the Czar's brother and of Siberia was in his hands.

This story was told in a few words to the Grand Duke, and Michael repeated also--and with what emotion!--the part Nadia had taken in these events.

"Who is this girl?" asked the Grand Duke.

"The daughter of the exile, Wassili Fedor," replied Michael.

"The daughter of Captain Fedor," said the Grand Duke, "has ceased to be the daughter of an exile. There are no longer exiles in Irkutsk."

Nadia, less strong in joy than she had been in grief, fell on her knees before the Grand Duke, who raised her with one hand, while he extended the other to Michael.

An hour after, Nadia was in her father's arms. Michael Strogoff, Nadia, and Wassili Fedor were united. This was the height of happiness to them all.

The Tartars had been repulsed in their double attack on the town. Wassili Fedor, with his little band, had driven back the first assailants who presented themselves at the Bolchaia Gate, expecting to find it open and which, by an instinctive feeling, often arising from sound judgment, he had determined to remain at and defend.

At the same time as the Tartars were driven back the besieged had mastered the fire. The liquid naphtha having rapidly burnt to the surface of the water, the flames did not go beyond the houses on the shore, and left the other quarters of the town uninjured. Before daybreak the troops of Feofar-Khan had retreated into their camp, leaving a large number of dead on and below the ramparts.

Among the dead was the gypsy Sangarre, who had vainly endeavored to join Ivan Ogareff.

For two days the besiegers attempted no fresh assault. They were discouraged by the death of Ogareff. This man was the mainspring of

the invasion, and he alone, by his plots long since contrived, had had sufficient influence over the khans and their hordes to bring them to the conquest of Asiatic Russia.

However, the defenders of Irkutsk kept on their guard, and the investment still continued; but on the 7th of October, at daybreak, cannon boomed out from the heights around Irkutsk. It was the succoring army under the command of General Kisselef, and it was thus that he made known his welcome arrival to the Grand Duke.

The Tartars did not wait to be attacked. Not daring to run the risk of a battle under the walls of Irkutsk, they immediately broke up the Angara camp. Irkutsk was at last relieved.

With the first Russian soldiers, two of Michael's friends entered the city. They were the inseparable Blount and Jolivet. On gaining the right bank of the Angara by means of the icy barrier, they had escaped, as had the other fugitives, before the flames had reached their raft. This had been noted by Alcide Jolivet in his book in this way: "Ran a narrow chance of being finished up like a lemon in a bowl of punch!"

Their joy was great on finding Nadia and Michael safe and sound; above all, when they learnt that their brave companion was not blind. Harry Blount inscribed this observation: "Red-hot iron is insufficient in some cases to destroy the sensibility of the optic nerve."

Then the two correspondents, settled for a time in Irkutsk, busied themselves in putting the notes and impressions of their journey in order. Thence were sent to London and Paris two interesting articles relative to the Tartar invasion, and which--a rare thing--did not contradict each other even on the least important points.

The remainder of the campaign was unfortunate to the Emir and his allies. This invasion, futile as all which attack the Russian Colossus must be, was very fatal to them. They soon found themselves cut off by the Czar's troops, who retook in succession all the conquered towns. Besides this, the winter was terrible, and, decimated by the cold, only a small part of these hordes returned to the steppes of Tartary.

The Irkutsk road, by way of the Ural Mountains, was now open. The Grand Duke was anxious to return to Moscow, but he delayed his journey to be present at a touching ceremony, which took place a few days after the entry of the Russian troops.

Michael Strogoff sought Nadia, and in her father's presence said to her, "Nadia, my sister still, when you left Riga to come to Irkutsk, did you leave it with any other regret than that for your mother?"

"No," replied Nadia, "none of any sort whatever."

"Then, nothing of your heart remains there?"

"Nothing, brother."

"Then, Nadia," said Michael, "I think that God, in allowing us to meet, and to go through so many severe trials together, must have meant us to be united forever."

"Ah!" said Nadia, falling into Michael's arms. Then turning towards Wassili Fedor, "My father," said she, blushing.

"Nadia," said Captain Fedor, "it will be my joy to call you both my children!"

The marriage ceremony took place in Irkutsk cathedral.

Jolivet and Blount very naturally assisted at this marriage, of which they wished to give an account to their readers.

"And doesn't it make you wish to imitate them?" asked Alcide of his friend.

"Pooh!" said Blount. "Now if I had a cousin like you--"

"My cousin isn't to be married!" answered Alcide, laughing.

"So much the better," returned Blount, "for they speak of difficulties arising between London and Pekin. Have you no wish to go and see what is

going on there?"

"By Jove, my dear Blount!" exclaimed Alcide Jolivet, "I was just going to make the same proposal to you."

And that was how the two inseparables set off for China.

A few days after the ceremony, Michael and Nadia Strogoff, accompanied by Wassili Fedor, took the route to Europe. The road so full of suffering when going, was a road of joy in returning. They traveled swiftly, in one of those sleighs which glide like an express train across the frozen steppes of Siberia.

However, when they reached the banks of the Dinka, just before Birskoe, they stopped for a while. Michael found the place where he had buried poor Nicholas. A cross was erected there, and Nadia prayed a last time on the grave of the humble and heroic friend, whom neither of them would ever forget.

At Omsk, old Marfa awaited them in the little house of the Strogoffs. She clasped passionately in her arms the girl whom in her heart she had already a hundred times called "daughter." The brave old Siberian, on that day, had the right to recognize her son and say she was proud of him.

After a few days passed at Omsk, Michael and Nadia entered Europe, and,

Wassili Fedor settling down in St. Petersburg, neither his son nor his daughter had any occasion to leave him, except to go and see their old mother.

The young courier was received by the Czar, who attached him specially to his own person, and gave him the Cross of St. George. In the course of time, Michael Strogoff reached a high station in the Empire. But it is not the history of his success, but the history of his trials, which deserves to be related.