

## Michel Strogoff

*J. Verne*

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Omsk, Tomsk and verst. This is what I remember from my reading of the book in my late childhood (could I have been ten or so?). At that time I read Verne with great delight and appreciation. The classical ones such as 'Around the World in Eighty Days', 'From the Earth to the Moon', 'Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea', I in particular liked the 'The Mysterious Island' and remember 'The Begum's Fortune' I also borrowed some of his more obscure ones (to the concern of the librarian at school) and then of course what in Swedish translation was called 'Tsarens kurir'. As a child I was mesmerized by them, and probably what intrigued me a lot were the many exact figures which were bandied around that bestowed a sense of realism and precision on the tales, as well as many scientific facts that were conveyed. Still the science fiction aspect was secondary, almost none of it appears in 'Michel Strogoff'. In recent years I have reread some of them, and in addition some I did not read in childhood, partly as French reading exercises partly to regain the pleasures of childhood reading. The first may have served its purpose but as to the second I have only met with disappointment, the glaring deficiencies have become apparent, the woodenness and stereotypes of the characters, the weakness of the plots and the thinness of the narratives, and by that I mean their schematic execution not unlike that you encounter in comics. But even comics may be rendered magical by the generous imagination of the child and its lack of experience and thus its eagerness to expand on it by means fair or foul. But for all of that they nevertheless conveyed a mood, precious in memory but best kept at a far distance as not to evaporate under the more penetrating gaze of an adult mind. Maybe the mood was not so much of the tales themselves as the magic of early reading and its intimations of worlds beyond.

As to the particular Verne under discussion I recall how one of the brothers of my maternal grandfather praised it, he and his brothers had read the tale in a serial adaptation published in the local newspaper and found it very exciting. I recall this incident as my grandfather was not interested in reading books, much to the consternation of my mother, claiming that they were all alike. This story reassured me that it had not always been so, after all tales are always appreciated by children, and my grandfather must also have been familiar with other books of the author, who died when my grandfather was in his mid-teens. And so what do I remember? I remember especially 'verst' the unit of length used in Russian and in my mind ever since associated with the vast distances of Siberia. I remember nothing particular about the plot and that puzzles me in retrospect. What you experience in real life imprints itself on you in a very different way than what you experience vicariously through reading, or dreaming for that matter. The particulars of the events of your life have significance as they bring with themselves ramifications, while what you experience in a tale has no such literal consequences, it can, like a dream, be isolated and confined and hence quickly fade. The tale of 'Michel Strogoff' is one of suspense and as such probably the most successful of all Verne's novels in that regard (as all popular

tales they contains aspects of suspense but seldom are they more than incidental). In fact it is a pure suspense story, with bits and pieces of geographical facts thrown in, and as with all suspense its goal is the achieve the orgasm of a happy resolution, and a successful such obliterates everything, unlike a non-successful one which would leave in the reader a lasting regret and hence linger on more insistently in memory. Forgetfulness comes in degrees. Most things forgotten are lost forever while others can be reawaken, ringing a bell so to speak. The book contains one such incident, namely the blinding of the main character. This does not evoke the actual reading of it, but merely a faint acknowledgment that this must be 'true'. Similarly the revelation at the very end that the courier was not blinded, making the resolution perfect, also reverberates faintly. In fact one may think that this reflects a loss of nerve on the side of the author, not really enduring the tragedy he had imposed on his hero. It makes the resolution, i.e. what is usually referred to as the happy ending, more satisfying, but at the price of trivializing the whole novel, making the adventures of the hero more like a bad dream from which one is happily woken up, than a real event in life, events such as have repercussions. Had the author not given in to sentimentality, the book no doubt would have made deeper and more lasting impression on me, and I would have remembered it much better. But how does the author bring about this change of heart? When Strogoff is about to be blinded he gets to have a last look at his mother (not his pretty companion whom he eventually will marry!) and this tough hero with his *sang froide* is overcome with sentimentality and his eyes are filled with tears. This excess liquid is evaporated by the heat from the blinding sword and in the process the vapor sets up an effective heat shield saving his eyes. Of course he realizes right away that this should not be given away but that he will play along, otherwise he would be killed rather than left free reduced to his own devices. This phenomenon is not just a fruit of the authors fancy but a real scientific phenomenon referred to as the Leidenfrost effect<sup>1</sup>. I was actually vaguely thinking of that while reading, which could be another deeply buried fragment of a memory not yet entirely evaporated.

Indeed the story is quite well done as a story of suspense. The events are nicely paced and the overall effect is that of an ordeal involving a lot of time and above all vast distances. Closer scrutiny would reveal weaknesses of the plot and incredible coincidences, but it is the sign of a well-spun yarn to skillfully hide defects and set its own rules that the reader has no choice but to accept.

The love story is commendably chaste, and brings to mind a similar story to be found involving Phileas Fogg during his eighty days traveling around the world. The relation between the two protagonists are more brotherly-sisterly than carnal, and in fact explicitly presented in this way and thus imposes no distraction to the juvenile reader to which it is addressed. It is interesting to note that in both cases the woman in question is depicted as meek and innocent, a little sister in fact, maybe a symptom of a widely held ideal of a woman.

There are some strange twists of the plot, gratuitous digressions, as when the young man, formerly encountered as a postal official doing his duty way beyond its call, and later

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<sup>1</sup> Most commonly observed in the kitchen when water is dropped on a hot plate. The droplets evaporate slowly hovering close to the hot plate but prevented to make actual contact due to a thin layer of insulating vapor, prolonging their lifetimes until their evaporation significantly.

appearing with his horse and carriage at a most apposite time, is abducted and being left to die buried up to his neck and miraculously found by our heroes at the moment of his expiration. What function in the narrative does this episode serve? To further recall and confirm the demonic cruelty of the Tartars in addition of disposing of a character who may be hard to include in a neat rounding off.

The invasion has no historical basis, and even the potentiality of the scenario is not that realistic, especially not the idea that one courier alone would be able to make any difference, if so they should have sent at least a dozen different couriers along distinct routes<sup>2</sup>. The book was published in 1876 after having been in the usual way serialized before, the reference to telegraphs indicates that it is supposed to take place contemporarily, and if so the Czar should correspond to Alexander II, although that is of course not of any importance. The interesting thing is that the Tartars are depicted so negatively, even worse than barbarians, on fact as evil demons beyond the ken of humanity. There is no secret made of the fact that they are Muselmans, and the Koran plays an important role when it comes to meting out the punishment and its use is indistinguishable from witchcraft. This clearly reflects a common view as to the status of Islam, and one may be tempted to draw parallels with modern days Islamophobia. The Russians by contrast are then brought out to be the representatives of civilization and reason, and I wonder how I would have reacted to this when I read it as a child, primed as I was to view the Russians as uncouth Barbarians (the same thing goes for my maternal grandfather, but probably he would have thought of Russians as at least half-civilized as opposed to the savages that Aborigines make up).

The book ends with the apposite remarks

*Michel Strogoff arriva, par la suite, à une haute situation dans l'empire. Mais ce n'est pas l'histoire de ses succès, c'est l'histoire de ses épreuves qui méritait d'être racontée.*

So true, as Simone Weil remarks. What you want to read about does not necessarily correspond to what you want to live through. Happiness is insipid and boring to read about, while misery is exciting and stimulating. In real life it is the other way around.

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<sup>2</sup> It is an ironic as well as comic fact, whether intentional or not I cannot really say, that the two newspaper men, travel as fast, if not faster than the courier himself, although they are fumbling amateurs.