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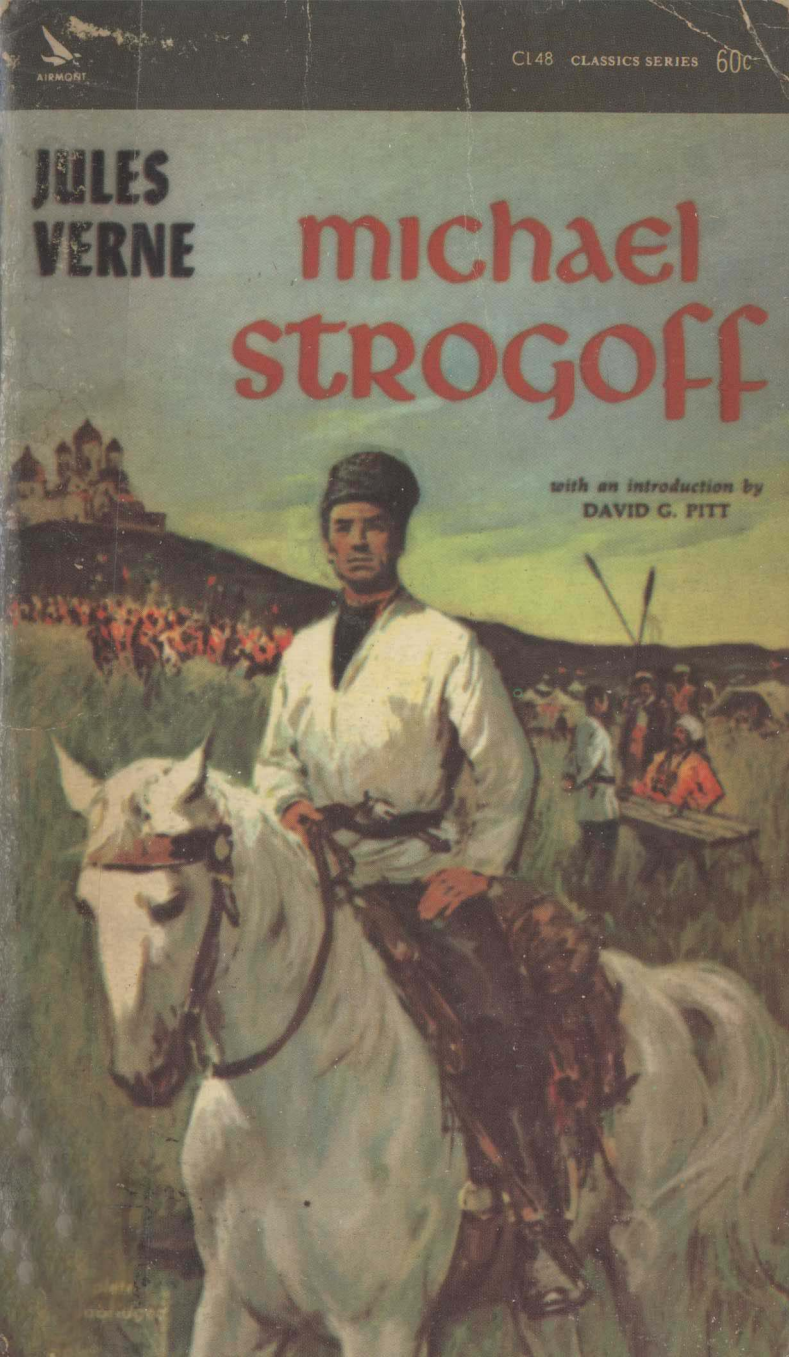
JULES VERNE

# MICHAEL STROGOFF

*with an introduction by*
DAVID G. PITT



# Michael Strogoff

## JULES VERNE

### Introduction

After this I shall travel only in my imagination!" Such was the vow made by an eleven-year-old boy who had just been chastised by his parents for running away to sea. His voyage had been a brief one—the ship after leaving one French port had put in at another not far distant before setting sail for India—but it had been long enough to demonstrate very vividly the great difference between the high adventure of dreams and the stark realities of life on a three-masted trader. The year was 1839 and the boy was Jules Verne. The vow, made in a moment of contrition and disillusionment, was not, of course, to be literally kept in every particular. Jules Verne did live to travel to many distant places, including America; yet his most numerous, most exciting, most strange and

wonderful journeys were those taken in his imagination and recorded by his unceasing pen.

Jules Verne's "Extraordinary Journeys," as they have come to be collectively known, were still many years in the future when he made his solemn declaration to travel only in his imagination. He had, of course, already traveled widely thus with the aid of the printed page: with *Robinson Crusoe*, *The Swiss Family Robinson*, and *The Last of the Mohicans*. He had been fond of reading, especially adventure stories and tales of travel, real and imaginary, ever since he had learned to read at Widow Sambain's dame-school, to which he had been sent at the age of six.

He had been born on February 8, 1828. His birthplace—most appropriate for one who was to write of floating islands and the like—was a flat, shifting, sandy island, the Ile Faydeau, situated in the river Loire and resembling a gigantic ship. Actually, it was part of the city of Nantes, but Jules Verne always thought of himself as a native of that strange island-ship in the Loire rather than of the city beside which it was moored. Who can say how much we owe to this curious circumstance of his birth?

His father, Pierre, was a lawyer, and young Jules was early destined for the same profession. But even while still at school, as we have seen already, his inclinations were toward other things. Besides the fascination that reading books of adventure held for him, and the yearning to live such adventures him-

self, the very idea of the possibilities of science and mechanical invention thrilled him to the core of his being. In the 1830's the first primitive forerunners of those discoveries and inventions that were soon to transform the world were already beginning to appear, and young Jules Verne seems to have seized upon every hint and suggestion that came his way to exploit it to the full in the workshop of his own fertile imagination. In that workshop the steam power that drove the crude paddle wheeler on the river was transferred to the horse-drawn omnibus to produce the first steam-driven vehicle on wheels. And in his school copybook, sketches of strange and wonderful ships both of the sea and the air appeared in rich profusion. A favorite plaything of his at the age of nine was a toy telegraphic set that could transmit signals over short distances. In a sense, Jules Verne never outgrew these childhood interests, never grew up; for years to come these early preoccupations continued to obsess him, leading him into more and more fantastic adventures of the imagination, adventures that still "holdeth children from play, and old men from the chimney corner."

He had to have a respectable profession, however, and so, after graduating from the dame-school, he and his brother Paul were sent to the Nantes *lycée* (high school), and thence to Paris in 1848 to study law. Here, shortly after his arrival, his first literary work began: the writing in collaboration with others of librettos for operettas. His interest in the theatre continued for some years, during

which time he wrote plays of his own and collaborated in the writing of others. But he still found opportunities for imaginary adventure, and from time to time there appeared in the *Musée des familles* (a popular family paper) tales from his pen of extraordinary journeys told in vivid and realistic detail. This, clearly, was his forte, and after a decade or so of sporadic forays into the world of imaginary travel and scientific fantasy, he began in earnest in 1863 to explore that world as no one before had dreamed of doing.

His books of "Extraordinary Journeys" appeared in rapid succession: *Five Weeks in a Balloon* (1862), *Journey to the Centre of the Earth* (1864), *From the Earth to the Moon* (1865), *Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea* (1869), *A Floating Village* (1871), *Around the World in Eighty Days* (1872), *The Mysterious Island* (1875), *Michael Strogoff, Courier of the Czar* (1876), *The Boy Captain* (1878), *The Giant Raft* (1880), *Clipper of the Clouds* (1886), and *The Sphinx of the Icefields* (1897)—to name but a few of his best-known works. In all, more than sixty full-length tales of strange adventures and travels came from his pen before his death in 1905, as well as many shorter stories, articles, librettos, and plays. A number of his novels, including *Michael Strogoff*, were made into plays and were highly successful on the stage.

Most young readers make the acquaintance of Jules Verne in such tales as *Journey to the Centre*

*of the Earth, Twenty Thousand Leagues under the Sea, Around the World in Eighty Days*, and other tales that combine the extraordinary in travel adventure with the fantastic and often, we may add, the prophetic in science fiction. But *Michael Strogoff, Courier of the Czar* is a rather different kind of tale. Like most of the others, it is an imaginary travel tale, but unlike them, it is not concerned with the miraculous possibilities of science. Instead, it takes us on a hazardous journey across the face of Russia and into Siberia. Verne had never visited Russia, but, as he did when writing his scientific tales, he undertook exhaustive research in his subject, so that the story of Michael Strogoff's journey is filled with vivid, realistic, and accurate detail.

The tale itself, quite apart from its rich local color and atmosphere, is an intensely exciting one. Michael's mission is to cross Siberia and warn the brother of the Czar that a traitor is about to betray the important town of Irkutsk, capital of Western Siberia, to the besieging Tartar armies. What the outcome of his mission is I shall not reveal, but its whole course is one continuous series of thrilling adventures, hairbreadth escapes, scenes of torture, and panoramas of a land laid waste by invading armies and the scorched-earth tactics of retreating populations. In addition to these and countless other sources of suspense and terror, the novel contains a love story that while it does not dominate the narrative is a moving and sustaining element that persists throughout the harrowing ordeals. Indeed, in hav-

ing this personal romantic thread woven into its fabric *Michael Strogoff* is almost unique among the novels of Jules Verne. Nor is it deficient in humor: Blount and Jolivet are two of the oddest yet most likable newspapermen in the business.

*Michael Strogoff* is frequently described as Verne's masterpiece. Whether it is or not, by the time you have read the pages that follow I think you will agree that it is, nevertheless, a very great book.

—DAVID G. PITT, M.A., PH.D.,
*Professor of English*
*Memorial University of Newfoundland*

# Michael Strogoff

JULES VERNE

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# PART ONE

## CHAPTER I

"SIRE, a fresh dispatch from Tomsk."

"Is the wire cut beyond that city?"

"Yes, sire, since yesterday."

"Telegraph hourly to Tomsk, General, and let me be kept posted on all that occurs."

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

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

During the whole evening the bands of the Preobrajensky and Paulowsky regiments had played without cessation polkas, mazurkas, schottisches and waltzes from the choicest of their repertories. Innumerable couples whirled through the magnificent rooms of the palace, which stood at a few paces only from the "old house of stones"—in former days the scene of so many terrible dramas, and the echoes of whose walls were this night awakened by the gay strains of the musicians.

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

The grand ballroom, the finest of all those contained in the New Palace, created a frame worthy of this procession of exalted personages and splendidly-dressed women. The rich ceiling, with its gilding already softened by the touch of time, appeared as if glittering with stars. The embroidered drapery of the curtains and doors, falling in gorgeous folds, assumed rich and varied hues, broken by the shadows of the heavy masses of damask.

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

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

This personage, of lofty stature, affable demeanor and calm features, though bearing traces of anxiety, moved from group to group, seldom speaking and appearing to pay but little attention either to the merriment of the younger guests or the graver remarks of the exalted dignitaries or members of the diplomatic corps who represented at the Russian court the

principal governments of Europe. Two or three of these astute politicians did not fail to detect on the countenance of their host symptoms of disquietude, the source of which eluded them, but none ventured to question him on the subject.

It was evidently the intention of the cavalry officer that his own anxieties should in no way cast a shade over the festivities. And, as he was one of those few personages whom almost the population of a world in itself was wont to obey, the gaiety of the ball was not for a moment checked.

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

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

"Without any, sire, and it is to be feared that shortly dispatches will no longer cross the Siberian frontier."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Let a description of him be immediately dispatched to Nijni-Novgorod, Perm, Ekaterinburg, Kasimov, Tioumen, Ichim, Omsk, Elamsk, Kalyvan, Tomsk, and to all the telegraphic stations with which communication is yet open."

"Your majesty's orders shall be instantly carried out," answered General Kissoff.

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

The general, having made a sign of respectful assent, bowing low, mingled for a short time with the crowd and finally left the apartments without his departure being noticed.

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

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

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

Of these two men, the one was English, the other French. Both were tall and thin, but the latter was sallow as are the southern Provençals while the former was ruddy like a Lancashire gentleman. The Anglo-Norman, formal, cold, grave, parsimonious of gestures and words, appearing only to speak or gesticulate under the influence of a spring operating at regular intervals. The Gaul, on the contrary, lively and petulant, expressed himself with lips, eyes, hands, all at once, having twenty different ways of explaining his thoughts, whereas his interlocutor seemed to have only one, immutably stereotyped on his brain.

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

In fact, the visual apparatus of the one had been singularly perfected by practice. The sensibility of its retina must have

been as instantaneous as that of those magicians who recognize a card merely by a rapid movement in cutting the pack, or by the arrangement only of marks invisible to others. The Frenchman, indeed, possessed in the highest degree what may be called "the memory of the eye."

The Englishman, on the contrary, appeared especially organized to listen and to hear. When his ears had been once struck by the sound of a voice he could not forget it, and after ten or even twenty years he would have recognized it among a thousand. His ears, to be sure, had not the power of moving as freely as those of animals who are provided with large auditory flaps. But, since scientific men know that human ears possess, in fact, a very limited power of movement, we should not be far wrong in affirming that those of the said Englishman became erect, and turned in all directions while endeavoring to gather in the sounds, in a manner apparent only to the naturalist. It must be observed that this perfection of sight and hearing was of wonderful assistance to these two men in their vocation, for the Englishman acted as correspondent of the *Daily Telegraph* and the Frenchman as correspondent of the . . . of what newspaper, or of what newspapers, he did not say; and when asked, he replied in a jocular manner that he corresponded with "his cousin Madeleine." This Frenchman, however, beneath his careless surface, was wonderfully shrewd and sagacious. Even while speaking at random, perhaps the better to hide his desire to learn, he never forgot himself. His loquacity even helped him to conceal his thoughts, and he was perhaps even more discreet than his colleague of the *Daily Telegraph*. Both were present at this fête given at the New Palace on the night of the fifteenth of July in their character of reporters, and for the greater edification of their readers.

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

Their journals did not restrict them with regard to money —the surest, the most rapid, the most perfect element of information known to this day. It must also be added, to their honor, that neither the one nor the other ever looked over or listened at the walls of private life, and that they only exer-

cised their vocation when political or social interests were at stake. In a word, they made what have been for some years called "the great political and military reports."

It will be seen, in following them, that they had generally an independent mode of viewing events, and, above all, their consequences, each having his own way of observing and appreciating. The object to be obtained being of adequate value, they never failed to expend the money required.

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

This evening they were both on the lookout. They felt, in fact, that there was something in the air.

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

The two correspondents were therefore led to chat together during the ball, a few minutes after the departure of General Kissoff, and they began by cautiously sounding each other.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Exactly."

"Do you remember, Mr. Blount, what occurred at Zakret in eighteen-twelve?"

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

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

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

"Ah! you are aware of that?"

"I am!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I shall follow it, Monsieur Jolivet!"

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

"Less safe, certainly, but——"

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

Thereupon the two correspondents separated, pleased to know that neither had stolen a march on the other.

At that moment the doors of the rooms adjoining the great reception rooms were thrown open, disclosing several immense tables beautifully laid out, and groaning under a profu-

sion of valuable china and gold plate. On the central table, reserved for the princes, princesses and members of the diplomatic corps, glittered an épergne of inestimable price, brought from London, and around this masterpiece of chased gold, were reflected, under the light of the lamps, a thousand pieces of the most beautiful service which the lamp factories of Sèvres had ever produced.

The guests of the New Palace immediately began to stream toward the supper rooms.

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

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

"Telegrams pass Tomsk no longer, sire."

"A courier this moment!"

The officer left the hall and entered a large adjoining antechamber.

It was a room with plain oak furniture, and situated in an angle of the New Palace. Several pictures, among them some by Horace Vernet, hung on the wall.

The officer hastily opened a window, as if he felt the want of air, and stepped out on a balcony to breathe the pure freshness of a lovely July night.

Beneath his eyes, bathed in moonlight, lay a fortified inclosure, from which rose two cathedrals, three palaces and an arsenal. Around this inclosure could be seen three distinct towns: Kitai-Gorod, Beloi-Gorod, Zemlianai-Gorod—European, Tartar and Chinese quarters of great extent, commanded by towers, belfries, minarets and the cupolas of three hundred churches with green domes surmounted by the silver cross. A little winding river here and there reflected the rays of the moon. All this together formed a curious mosaic of variously colored houses, set in an immense frame of ten leagues in circumference.

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