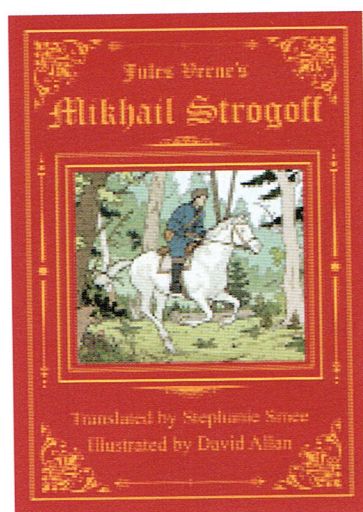


## A NEW TRANSLATION OF A CLASSIC



Until a book has weathered at least one generation and is accepted in the next, it can hardly be given the rank of a classic.\*

Jules Verne's **Mikhail Strogoff** has been newly translated from the French, the first such undertaking in over a hundred years. I have to confess to not having read it before and, to be honest, approached it with a sense of duty rather than with enthusiasm. I read into the night.

Early the following morning as a Postscript to an email to a friend I wrote:

I've just read a new translation of Jules Verne's **Mikhail Strogoff** (and while having trouble NOT referring to it as Strogonoff) am strangely taken by it — rattles along at a great pace (though you probably know this) and despite a small stamp of the foot at a rather miraculous regaining of the hero's sight after having had his eyes branded with a red hot dagger, it is quite addictive.

Trevor replied:

All Jules Verne's heroes have instant recuperative powers. In his novel about New Zealand — yes, there is one — one of the characters gets a full facial tattoo with bone chisels and just carries on normally with none of the swelling, pain etc.

It's the power of fiction!

•Children's Literature in the Elementary School 6th ed. 1997. Charlotte S. Huck, Susan Hepler, Janet Hickman and Barbara Z. Kieferp. p.28

Jules Verne's **Mikhail Strogoff**, translated by *Stephanie Smee* (2016)

ill. by *David Allan*, foreword by *Sophie Masson*, Map and endpapers by *Fiona McDonald*, 337pp. 978 0 9942340 0 1 \$55.00

Limited edition of 750 Copies.

The story begins in the magnificence of the New Palace in Moscow and immediately the reader is caught with Verne's powers of description and the translator's capture of mood:

*The glow from the reception rooms, softened by a light layer of condensation on the glass, filtered through the panes of the immense, rounded bay windows. From outside, its reflection was like the flames of a fire, contrasting sharply with the dark night which, for several hours now, had enveloped the glittering palace.*

The Tsar has just been made aware of threats to his lands from the Russian traitor, Ivan Ogareff, who has allied himself with the Mongols of the East, encouraging them to invade over the Steppes of Russia. As the only telegraph wire to the area has been cut, the Tsar needs a reliable, trustworthy courier who can journey to the East, warn the Tsar's brother, the Grand Duke, of the danger while ascertaining the strength and whereabouts of the enemy there and then return in order to deliver an assessment of the situation.

Mikhail Strogoff from the Imperial Courier Corps is recommended; Strogoff is imposing in size and is described as *a man of steel* (p.25). He is honest and loyal, was born and grew up under the tutelage of his father in the area to which he will be travelling; his mother still lives there. He can live off the land, is a fearsome warrior and is fluent in a number of languages and while confident in his abilities is a humble and caring person.

Setting off to the same region at the same time are two foreign journalists,

*a good judge of character, observing the two foreigners a little more closely, would neatly have summed up the physical contrast the two by remarking that if the Frenchman was 'all eyes' the Englishman was 'all ears'...*

Apt for two journalists who are caught up in events as they follow the story unfolding before them.

Nor are they the only ones who will cross paths with Strogoff. At a stop on the train route, a young woman enters their carriage bound for the East; serene, beautiful and radiating inner strength, she is travelling to join her father, a political exile in Siberia. Also on the road to Siberia is the traitor Ogareff intent on capturing the Tsar's brother and the power that he would wield if he did so.

Thus begins a journey over the vast steppes of Russia and across the Ural mountains in winter. The crossing is horrendous, in sleet and howling winds and it is there that the reporters, Strogoff and Natalia meet again. They travel together facing thieves, traitors and warring armies. Strogoff earns the hatred of a gypsy woman working for the traitor Ogareff. Strogoff is heroic in his efforts to keep them all safe, avoiding marauding armies, everyday thieves and escalating natural and man-made disasters. Throughout, he protects and cherishes Nadia. Arriving in the East, Strogoff is recognised by his mother, unfortunately witnessed by a gypsy who uses the information to unmask him and hand him over to the invaders. His punishment is to be blinded.

Sightless, Strogoff continues on his mission; Nadia becomes his eyes and the pair continue their journey. The evil Ogareff continues to plot the downfall of the Tsar while Strogoff and Nadia track him down. There is an exciting journey by raft down the river while threatened, at one stage, by wolves. They arrive at the residence of the Grand Duke in time to save the day and Strogoff reveals that he had not been blinded, saved by the tears he shed for his mother. All is neatly tidied up and our hero and heroine will live happily ever after.

The story flows easily with no hint of awkwardness in the translation. The time and place is acknowledged by the choice of words and the speech patterns flow naturally providing a sense of time and place. Verne's descriptive powers are retained without overly dramatic prose.

Stephanie Smee is a translator into English of all things literary and French. Having worked as lawyer in Sydney and London, she became a French legal translator before turning to literary translation.