

Little Nex Classics

THE DAUGHTER OF THE COMMANDANT

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Book II

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CHAPTER VI. PUGATCHEF.

BEFORE BEGINNING TO RELATE those strange events to which I was witness, I must say a few words about the state of affairs in the district of Orenburg about the end of the year 1773. This rich and large province was peopled by a crowd of half-savage tribes, who had lately acknowledged the sovereignty of the Russian Tzars. Their perpetual revolts, their impatience of all rule and civilized life, their treachery and cruelty, obliged the authorities to keep a sharp watch upon them in order to reduce them to submission.

Forts had been placed at suitable points, and in most of them troops had been permanently established, composed of Cossacks, formerly possessors of the banks of the River Yaik. But even these Cossacks, who should have been a guarantee for the peace and quiet of the country, had for some time shown a dangerous and unruly spirit towards the Imperial Government. In 1772 a riot took place in the principal settlement. This riot was occasioned by the severe measures taken by General Traubenberg, in order to quell the insubordination of the army. The only result was the barbarous murder of Traubenberg, the substitution of new chiefs, and at last the suppression of the revolt by volleys of grape and harsh penalties.



All this befell shortly before my coming to Fort Belogorsk. Then all was, or seemed, quiet. But the authorities had too lightly lent faith to the pretended repentance of the rebels, who were silently brooding over their hatred, and only awaiting a favourable opportunity to reopen the struggle.

One evening (it was early in October, 1773) I was alone in my quarters, listening to the whistling of the autumn wind and watching the clouds passing rapidly over the moon. A message came from the Commandant that he wished to see me at once at his house. I found there Chvabrine, Iwan Ignatiitch, and the *ouriadnik* of the Cossacks. Neither the wife nor daughter of the Commandant was in the room. He greeted me in an absent manner. Then, closing the door, he made everybody sit down, except the *ouriadnik*, who remained standing, drew a letter from his pocket, and said to us—

“Gentlemen, important news. Listen to what the General writes.”

He put on his spectacles and read as follows:—

*“To the Commandant of Fort Belogorsk,
“Captain Mironoff, these. (Secret.)*

“I hereby inform you that the fugitive and schismatic Don Cossack, Emelian Pugatchef, after being guilty of the unpardonable insolence of usurping the name of our late Emperor, Peter III, has assembled a gang of robbers, excited



risings in villages on the Yaik, and taken and oven destroyed several forts, while committing everywhere robberies and murders. In consequence, when you shall receive this, it will be your duty to take such measures as may be necessary against the aforesaid rascally usurper, and, if possible, crush him completely should he venture to attack the fort confided to your care.”

“Take such measures as may be necessary,” said the Commandant, taking off his spectacles and folding up the paper. “You know it is very easy to say that. The scoundrel seems in force, and we have but a hundred and thirty men, even counting the Cossacks, on whom we must not count too much, be it said, without any reproach to you, Maximitch.” The *ouriadnik* smiled. “Nevertheless, let us do our duty, gentlemen. Be ready, place sentries, let there be night patrols in case of attack, shut the gates, and turn out the troops. You, Maximitch, keep a sharp eye on the Cossacks; look to the cannon, and let it be well cleansed; and, above all, let everything be kept secret. Let no one in the fort know anything until the time comes.”

After thus giving his orders, Ivan Kouzmitch dismissed us. I went out with Chvabrine, speculating upon what we had just heard.

“What do you think of it? How will it all end?” I asked him.

“God knows,” said he; “we shall see. As yet there is evidently nothing serious. If, however—”



Then he fell into a brown study while whistling absently a French air.

In spite of all our precautions the news of Pugatchef's appearance spread all over the fort. Whatever was the respect in which Ivan Kouzmitch held his wife, he would not have revealed to her for the world a secret confided to him on military business.

After receiving the General's letter he had rather cleverly got rid of Vassilissa Igorofna by telling her that Father Garasim had heard most extraordinary news from Orenburg, which he was keeping most profoundly dark.

Vassilissa Igorofna instantly had a great wish to go and see the Pope's wife, and, by the advice of Ivan Kouzmitch, she took Masha, lest she should be dull all alone.

Left master of the field, Ivan Kouzmitch sent to fetch us at once, and took care to shut up Polashka in the kitchen so that she might not spy upon us.

Vassilissa Igorofna came home without having been able to worm anything out of the Pope's wife; she learnt upon coming in that during her absence Ivan Kouzmitch had held a council of war, and that Palashka had been locked up. She suspected that her husband had deceived her, and she immediately began overwhelming him with questions. But Ivan Kouzmitch was ready for this onset; he did not care in the least, and he boldly answered his curious better-half—



“Look here, little mother, the country-women have taken it into their heads to light fires with straw, and as that might be the cause of a misfortune, I assembled my officers, and I ordered them to watch that the women do not make fires with straw, but rather with faggots and brambles.”

“And why were you obliged to shut up Polashka?” his wife asked him. “Why was the poor girl obliged to stay in the kitchen till we came back?”

Ivan Kouzmitch was not prepared for such a question; he stammered some incoherent words.

Vassilissa Igorofna instantly understood that her husband had deceived her, but as she could not at that moment get anything out of him, she forebore questioning him, and spoke of some pickled cucumbers which Akoulina Pamphilovna knew how to prepare in a superlative manner. All night long Vassilissa Igorofna lay awake trying to think what her husband could have in his head that she was not permitted to know.

The morrow, on her return from mass, she saw Iwan Ignatiitch busy clearing the cannon of the rags, small stones, bits of wood, knuckle-bones, and all kinds of rubbish that the little boys had crammed it with.

“What can these warlike preparations mean?” thought the Commandant's wife. “Can it be that they are afraid of an attack by the Kirghiz; but then is it likely that Ivan Kouzmitch would hide from me such a trifle?”



She called Iwan Ignatiitch, determined to have out of him the secret which was provoking her feminine curiosity.

Vassilissa Igorofna began by making to him some remarks on household matters, like a judge who begins a cross-examination by questions irrelevant to the subject in hand, in order to reassure and lull the watchfulness of the accused. Then, after a few minutes' silence, she gave a deep sigh, and said, shaking her head—

“Oh! good Lord! Just think what news! What will come of all this?”

“Eh! my little mother,” replied Iwan Ignatiitch; “the Lord is merciful. We have soldiers enough, and much, powder; I have cleared the cannon. Perhaps we may be able to defeat this Pugatchef. If God do not forsake us, the wolf will eat none of us here.”

“And what manner of man is this Pugatchef?” questioned the Commandant's wife.

Iwan Ignatiitch saw plainly that he had said too much, and bit his tongue; but it was too late. Vassilissa Igorofna obliged him to tell her all, after giving her word that she would tell no one.

She kept her promise, and did not breathe a word indeed to anyone, save only to the Pope's wife, and that for the very good reason that the good lady's cow, being still out on the steppe, might be “lifted” by the robbers.



Soon everybody was talking of Pugatchef. The rumours abroad about him were very diverse. The Commandant sent the *ouriadnik* on a mission to look well into all in the neighbouring village and little forts. The *ouriadnik* came back after an absence of two days, and reported that he had seen in the steppe, about sixty versts from the fort, many fires, and that he had heard the Bashkirs say that an innumerable force was approaching. He had nothing of a more detailed or accurate nature to relate, having been afraid of going too far.

We soon began to notice a certain stir among the Cossacks in the garrison. They gathered in all the streets in little groups, spoke among themselves in low voices, and dispersed directly they caught sight of a dragoon or any other Russian soldier. They were watched. Joulai, a baptized Kalmuck, revealed to the Commandant something very serious. According to him the *ouriadnik* had made a false report. On his return the perfidious Cossack had told his comrades that he had advanced upon the rebels, and that he had been presented to their chief, and that this chief gave him his hand to kiss and had had a long interview with him. At once the Commandant put the *ouriadnik* in arrest, and declared Joulai his substitute. This change was received by the Cossacks with manifest discontent. They grumbled aloud, and Iwan Ignatiitch, who executed the Commandant's orders, heard them with his own ears say pretty clearly—

“Only wait a bit, you garrison rat!”



The Commandant had intended to cross-examine his prisoner that same day, but the *ouriadnik* had escaped, doubtless with the connivance of his accomplices.

Another thing occurred to augment the Commandant's disquiet; a Bashkir was taken bearing seditious letters. Upon this occasion the Commandant decided upon assembling his officers anew, and in order to do that he wished again to get rid of his wife under some plausible pretext. But as Ivan Kouzmitch was one of the most upright and sincere of men he could not think of any other way than that which he had already employed on a previous occasion.

“Do you know, Vassilissa Igorofna,” said he to her, while clearing his throat once or twice, “it is said that Father Garosim has received from the town—”

“Hold your tongue,” interrupted his wife; “you want again to call a council of war, and talk without me about Emelian Pugatchef; but you will not deceive me this time.”

Ivan Kouzmitch opened his eyes wide.

“Well, little mother,” said he, “if you know all, stay; there is nothing more to be done, we will talk before you.”

“Yes, you are quite right, my little father,” rejoined she; “it is of no use your trying to play the sly fox. Send for the officers.”

We again met. Ivan Kouzmitch read to us, before his wife, Pugatchef's proclamation, drawn up by some illiterate Cossack. The robber proclaimed his intention of marching directly upon our fort, inviting the Cossacks and the soldiers to join him, and



counselling the chiefs not to withstand him, threatening them, should they do so, with the utmost torture.

The proclamation was written in coarse but emphatic terms, and was likely to produce a great impression on the minds of simple people.

“What a rascal,” cried the Commandant's wife. “Just look what he dares to propose to us! To go out to meet him and lay our colours at his feet! Oh! the son of a dog! He doesn't then know that we have been forty years in the service, and that, thank heaven, we have had a taste of all sorts! Is it possible that there can have been commandants base and cowardly enough to obey this robber?”

“Such a thing should not be possible,” rejoined Ivan Kouzmitch; “nevertheless, they say the scoundrel has already got possession of several forts.”

“It appears that he is in strength, indeed,” observed Chvabrine.

“We shall know directly the amount of his strength,” resumed the Commandant. “Vassilissa Igorofna, give me the key of the barn. Ivan Ignatiitch, bring up the Bashkir and tell Joulai to fetch the rods.”

“Wait a bit, Ivan Kouzmitch,” said the Commandant's wife, rising; “let me take Masha out of the house. Without I do so she would hear the cries, and they would frighten her. And as for me, to tell the truth, I am not over curious about such matters. So hoping to see you again—”



Torture was then so rooted in the practice of justice that the beneficial ukase ordaining its abolition remained a long time of none effect. It was thought that the confession of the accused was indispensable to condemnation, an idea not merely unreasonable, but contrary to the dictates of the simplest good sense in legal matters, for, if the denial of the accused be not accepted as proof of his innocence, the extorted confession should still less serve as proof of his guilt. Yet even now I still hear old judges sometimes regret the abolition of this barbarous custom.

But in those days no one ever doubted of the necessity for torture, neither the judges nor the accused themselves. That is why the Commandant's order did not arouse any surprise or emotion among us. Iwan Ignatiitch went off to seek the Bashkir, who was under lock and key in the Commandant's barn, and a few minutes later he was brought into the ante-room. The Commandant ordered him to be brought before him.

The Bashkir crossed the sill with difficulty, owing to the wooden shackles he had on his feet. I glanced at him and involuntarily shuddered.

He lifted his high cap and remained near the door. I shall never forget that man; he seemed to be at least seventy years old, and he had neither nose nor ears. His head was shaven, and his beard consisted of a few grey hairs. He was little of stature, thin and bent; but his Tartar eyes still sparkled.



“Eh! eh!” said the Commandant, who recognized by these terrible marks one of the rebels punished in 1741, “you are an old wolf, by what I see. You have already been caught in our traps. 'Tis not the first time you have rebelled, since you have been so well cropped. Come near and tell me who sent you.”

The old Bashkir remained silent, and looked at the Commandant with a look of complete idiocy.

“Well, why don't you speak?” continued Ivan Kouzmitch. “Don't you understand Russ? Joulai, ask him in your language who sent him to our fort.”

Joulai repeated Ivan Kouzmitch's question in the Tartar language. But the Bashkir looked at him with the same expression, and spoke never a word.

“Jachki!” the Commandant rapped out a Tartar oath, “I'll make you speak. Here, Joulai, strip him of his striped dressing-gown, his idiot's dress, and stripe his shoulders. Now then, Joulai, touch him up properly.”

Two pensioners began undressing the Bashkir. Great uneasiness then overspread the countenance of the unhappy man. He began looking all round like a poor little animal in the hands of children. But when one of the pensioners seized his hands in order to twine them round his neck, and, stooping, upraised the old man on his shoulders, when Joulai took the rods and lifted his hands to strike, then the Bashkir gave a long, deep moan, and, throwing back his head, opened his mouth, wherein, instead of a tongue, was moving a short stump.



We were all horrified.

“Well,” said the Commandant, “I see we can get nothing out of him. Joulai, take the Bashkir back to the barn; and as for us, gentlemen, we have still to deliberate.”

We were continuing to discuss our situation, when Vassilissa Igorofna burst into the room, breathless, and looking affrighted.

“What has happened to you?” asked the Commandant, surprised.

“Misery! misery!” replied Vassilissa Igorofna. “Fort Nijneosern was taken this morning. Father Garasim's boy has just come back. He saw how it was taken. The Commandant and all the officers have been hanged, all the soldiers are prisoners. The rascals are coming here.”

This unexpected news made a great impression upon me. The Commandant of Fort Nijneosern, a gentle and quiet young man, was known to me. Two months previously he had passed on his way from Orenburg with his young wife, and he had stayed with Ivan Kouzmitch.

The Nijneosernaia was only twenty-five versts away from our fort. From hour to hour we might expect to be attacked by Pugatchef. The probable fate of Marya Ivanofna rose vividly before my imagination, and my heart failed me as I thought of it.

“Listen, Ivan Kouzmitch,” I said to the Commandant, “it is our duty to defend the fort to the last gasp, that is understood.



But we must think of the women's safety. Send them to Orenburg, if the road be still open, or to some fort further off and safer, which the rascals have not yet had time to reach.”

Ivan Kouzmitch turned to his wife.

“Look here, mother, really, had we not better send you away to some more distant place till the rebels be put down?”

“What nonsense!” replied his wife.

“Show me the fortress that bullets cannot reach. In what respect is Belogorskaia not safe? Thank heaven, we have now lived here more than twenty-one years. We have seen the Bashkirs and the Kirghiz; perhaps we may weary out Pugatchef here.”

“Well, little mother,” rejoined Ivan Kouzmitch, “stay if you like, since you reckon so much on our fort. But what are we to do with Masha? It is all right if we weary him out or if we be succoured. But if the robbers take the fort?”

“Well, then—”

But here Vassilissa Igorofna could only stammer and become silent, choked by emotion.

“No, Vassilissa Igorofna,” resumed the Commandant, who remarked that his words had made a great impression on his wife, perhaps for the first time in her life; “it is not proper for Masha to stay here. Let us send her to Orenburg to her godmother. There are enough soldiers and cannons there, and the walls are stone. And I should even advise you to go away



thither, for though you be old yet think on what will befall you if the fort be taken by assault.”

“Well! well!” said the wife, “we will send away Masha; but don't ask me to go away, and don't think to persuade me, for I will do no such thing. It will not suit me either in my old age to part from you and go to seek a lonely grave in a strange land. We have lived together; we will die together.”

“And you are right,” said the Commandant. “Let us see, there is no time to lose. Go and get Masha ready for her journey; to-morrow we will start her off at daybreak, and we will even give her an escort, though, to tell the truth, we have none too many people here. But where is she?”

“At Akoulina Pamphilovna's,” answered his wife. “She turned sick when she heard of the taking of Nijneosern; I dread lest she should fall ill. Oh! God in heaven! that we should have lived to see this!”

Vassilissa Igorofna went away to make ready for her daughter's departure.

The council at the Commandant's still continued, but I no longer took any part in it. Marya Ivanofna reappeared for supper, pale and her eyes red. We supped in silence, and we rose from table earlier than usual. Each of us returned to his quarters after bidding good-bye to the whole family. I purposely forgot my sword, and came back to fetch it. I felt I should find Marya alone; in fact, she met me in the porch, and handed me my sword.



“Good-bye, Petr' Andrejitch,” she said to me, crying; “they are sending me to Orenburg. Keep well and happy. Mayhap God will allow us to see one another again, if not—”

She began to sob. I pressed her in my arms.

“God be with you, my angel,” I said to her. “My darling, my loved one, whatever befall me, rest assured that my last thought and my last prayer will be for you.”

Masha still wept, sheltered on my breast. I kissed her passionately, and abruptly went out.



CHAPTER VII. THE ASSAULT.

ALL THE NIGHT I COULD NOT SLEEP, and I did not even take off my clothes. I had meant in the early morning to gain the gate of the fort, by which Marya Ivanofna was to leave, to bid her a last good-bye. I felt that a complete change had come over me. The agitation of my mind seemed less hard to bear than the dark melancholy in which I had been previously plunged. Blended with the sorrow of parting, I felt within me vague, but sweet, hopes, an eager expectation of coming dangers, and a feeling of noble ambition.

The night passed quickly. I was going out, when my door opened and the corporal came in to tell me that our Cossacks had left the fort during the night, taking away with them by force Joulai, and that around our ramparts unknown people were galloping. The thought that Marya Ivanofna had not been able to get away terrified me to death. I hastily gave some orders to the corporal, and I ran to the Commandant's house.

Day was breaking. I was hurrying down the street when I heard myself called by someone. I stopped.

“Where are you going, if I may presume to ask you?” said Iwan Ignatiitch, catching me up. “Ivan Kouzmitch is on the ramparts, and has sent me to seek you. The '*pugatch*' has come.”



“Is Marya Ivanofna gone?” I asked, with an inward trembling.

“She hasn't had time,” rejoined Iwan Ignatiitch. “The road to Orenburg is blocked, the fort surrounded, and it's a bad look-out, Petr' Andrejitch.”

We went to the ramparts, a little natural height, and fortified by a palisade. We found the garrison here under arms. The cannon had been dragged hither the preceding evening. The Commandant was walking up and down before his little party; the approach of danger had given the old warrior wonderful activity. Out on the steppe, and not very far from the fort, could be seen about twenty horsemen, who appeared to be Cossacks; but amongst them were some Bashkirs, easily distinguished by their high caps and their quivers. The Commandant passed down the ranks of the little army, saying to the soldiers—

“Now, children, let us do well to-day for our mother, the Empress, and let us show all the world that we are brave men, and true to our oaths.”

The soldiers by loud shouts expressed their goodwill and assent. Chvabrine remained near me, attentively watching the enemy. The people whom we could see on the steppe, noticing doubtless some stir in the fort, gathered into parties, and consulted together. The Commandant ordered Iwan Ignatiitch to point the cannon at them, and himself applied the match. The ball passed whistling over their heads without doing them any



harm. The horsemen at once dispersed at a gallop, and the steppe was deserted.

At this moment Vassilissa Igorofna appeared on the ramparts, followed by Marya, who had not wished to leave her.

“Well,” said the Commandant's wife, “how goes the battle? Where is the enemy?”

“The enemy is not far,” replied Ivan Kouzmitch; “but if God wills all will be well. And you, Masha, are you afraid?”

“No, papa,” replied Marya, “I am more frightened alone in the house.”

She glanced at me, trying to smile. I squeezed the hilt of my sword, remembering that I had received it the eve from her hand, as if for her defence. My heart burnt within my breast; I felt as if I were her knight; I thirsted to prove to her that I was worthy of her trust, and I impatiently expected the decisive moment.

All at once, coming from a height about eight versts from the fort, appeared fresh parties of horsemen, and soon the whole steppe became covered with people, armed with arrows and lances. Amongst them, dressed in a red caftan, sword in hand, might be seen a man mounted on a white horse, a conspicuous figure. This was Pugatchef himself.

He stopped, and they closed round him, and soon afterwards, probably by his orders, four men came out of the crowd, and approached our ramparts at full gallop. We recognized in them some of our traitors. One of them waved a



sheet of paper above his head; another bore on the point of his pike the head of Joulai, which he cast to us over the palisade. The head of the poor Kalmuck rolled to the feet of the Commandant.

The traitors shouted to us—

“Don't fire. Come out to receive the Tzar; the Tzar is here.”

“Children, fire!” cried the Commandant for all answer.

The soldiers fired a volley. The Cossack who had the letter quivered and fell from his horse; the others fled at full speed. I glanced at Marya Ivanofna. Spellbound with horror at the sight of Joulai's head, stunned by the noise of the volley, she seemed unconscious. The Commandant called the corporal, and bid him go and take the paper from the fallen Cossack. The corporal went out into the open, and came back leading by its bridle the dead man's horse. He gave the letter to the Commandant.

Ivan Kouzmitch read it in a low voice, and tore it into bits. We now saw that the rebels were making ready to attack. Soon the bullets whistled about our ears, and some arrows came quivering around us in the earth and in the posts of the palisade.

“Vassilissa Igorofna,” said the Commandant, “this is not a place for women. Take away Masha; you see very well that the girl is more dead than alive.”

Vassilissa Igorofna, whom the sound of the bullets had somewhat subdued, glanced towards the steppe, where a great stir was visible in the crowd, and said to her husband—



“Ivan Kouzmitch, life and death are in God's hands; bless Masha. Masha, go to your father.”

Pale and trembling, Marya approached Ivan Kouzmitch and dropped on her knees, bending before him with reverence.

The old Commandant made the sign of the cross three times over her, then raised her up, kissed her, and said to her, in a voice husky with emotion—

“Well, Masha, may you be happy. Pray to God, and He will not forsake you. If an honest man come forward, may God grant you both love and wisdom. Live together as we have lived, my wife and I. And now farewell, Masha. Vassilissa Igorofna, take her away quickly.”

Marya threw herself upon his neck and began sobbing.

“Kiss me, too,” said the Commandant's wife, weeping. “Good-bye, my Ivan Kouzmitch. Forgive me if I have ever vexed you.”

“Good-bye, good-bye, little mother,” said the Commandant, embracing his old companion. “There, now, enough; go away home, and if you have time put Masha on a *'sarafan.*”

The Commandant's wife went away with her daughter. I followed Marya with my eyes; she turned round and made me a last sign.

Ivan Kouzmitch came back to us, and turned his whole attention to the enemy. The rebels gathered round their leader, and all at once dismounted hastily.



“Be ready,” the Commandant said to us, “the assault is about to begin.”

At the same moment resounded wild war cries. The rebels were racing down on the fort. Our cannon was loaded with grape. The Commandant allowed them to approach within a very short distance, and again applied a match to the touch-hole. The grape struck in the midst of the crowd, and dispersed it in every direction. The leader alone remained to the fore, brandishing his sword; he appeared to be exhorting them hotly. The yells which had ceased for a moment were redoubled anew.

“Now, children,” cried the Commandant, “open the door, beat the drum, and forward! Follow me for a sally!”

The Commandant, Iwan Ignatiitch, and I found ourselves in a moment beyond the parapet. But the garrison, afraid, had not stirred.

“What are you doing, my children?” shouted Ivan Kouzmitch. “If we must die, let us die; it is our duty.”

At this moment the rebels fell upon us and forced the entrance of the citadel. The drum ceased, the garrison threw down its arms. I had been thrown down, but I got up and passed helter-skelter with the crowd into the fort. I saw the Commandant wounded in the head, and hard pressed by a little band of robbers clamouring for the keys. I was running to help him, when several strong Cossacks seized me, and bound me with their “*kuchaks*,” shouting—



“Wait a bit, you will see what will become of you traitors to the Tzar!”

We were dragged along the streets. The inhabitants came out of their houses, offering bread and salt. The bells were rung. All at once shouts announced that the Tzar was in the square waiting to receive the oaths of the prisoners. All the crowd diverged in that direction, and our keepers dragged us thither.

Pugatchef was seated in an armchair on the threshold of the Commandant's house. He wore an elegant Cossack caftan, embroidered down the seams. A high cap of marten sable, ornamented with gold tassels, came closely down over his flashing eyes. His face did not seem unknown to me. The Cossack chiefs surrounded him. Father Garasim, pale and trembling, was standing, cross in hand, at the foot of the steps, and seemed to be silently praying for the victims brought before him. In the square a gallows was being hastily erected. When we came near, some Bashkirs drove back the crowd, and we were presented to Pugatchef.

The bells ceased clanging, and the deepest silence reigned again.

“Where is the Commandant?” asked the usurper. Our *ouriadnik* came forward and pointed out Ivan Kouzmitch. Pugatchef looked fiercely upon the old man and said to him, “How was it you dared to oppose me, your rightful Emperor?”

The Commandant, enfeebled by his wound, collected his remaining strength, and replied, in a resolute tone—



“You are not my Emperor; you are a usurper and a robber!”

Pugatchef frowned and waved his white handkerchief. Several Cossacks immediately seized the old Commandant and dragged him away to the gallows. Astride on the crossbeam, sat the disfigured Bashkir who had been cross-examined on the preceding evening; he held a rope in his hand, and I saw the next moment poor Ivan Kouzmitch swinging in the air. Then Iwan Ignatiitch was brought before Pugatchef.

“Swear fidelity,” Pugatchef said to him, “to the Emperor, Petr' Fedorovitch!”

“You are not our Emperor!” replied the lieutenant, repeating his Commandant's words; “you are a robber, my uncle, and a usurper.”

Pugatchef again gave the handkerchief signal, and good Iwan Ignatiitch swung beside his old chief. It was my turn. Boldly I looked on Pugatchef and made ready to echo the answer of my outspoken comrades.

Then, to my inexpressible surprise, I saw among the rebels Chvabrine, who had found time to cut his hair short and to put on a Cossack caftan. He approached Pugatchef, and whispered a few words in his ear.

“Hang him!” said Pugatchef, without deigning to throw me a look. The rope was passed about my neck. I began saying a prayer in a low voice, offering up to God a sincere repentance for all my sins, imploring Him to save all those who were dear to my heart. I was already at the foot of the gallows.



“Fear nothing! Fear nothing!” the assassins said to me, perhaps to give me courage, when all at once a shout was heard—

“Stop, accursed ones!”

The executioners stayed their hand. I looked up. Saveliitch lay prostrate at the feet of Pugatchef.

“Oh! my own father!” my poor follower was saying. “What need have you of the death of this noble child? Let him go free, and you will get a good ransom; but for an example and to frighten the rest, let them hang me, an old man!”

Pugatchef gave a signal; I was immediately unbound.

“Our father shows you mercy,” they said to me. At this moment I cannot say that I was much overjoyed at my deliverance, but I cannot say either that I regretted it, for my feelings were too upset. I was again brought before the usurper and forced to kneel at his feet. Pugatchef held out to me his muscular hand. “Kiss his hand! kiss his hand!” was shouted around me. But rather would I have preferred the most cruel torture to such an abasement.

“My father, Petr' Andrejitch,” whispered Saveliitch to me, and nudged me with his elbow, “don't be obstinate. What does it matter? Spit and kiss the hand of the rob—, kiss his hand!”

I did not stir. Pugatchef withdrew his hand and said, smiling—

“Apparently his lordship is quite idiotic with joy; raise him.”



I was helped up and left free. The infamous drama drew to a close.

The villagers began to swear fidelity. One after another they came near, kissed the cross, and saluted the usurper. Then it came to the turn of the soldiers of the garrison. The tailor of the company, armed with his big blunt scissors, cut off their queues. They shook their heads and touched their lips to Pugatchef's hand; the latter told them they were pardoned and enrolled amongst his troops.

All this lasted about three hours. At last Pugatchef rose from his armchair and went down the steps, followed by his chiefs. There was brought for him a white horse, richly caparisoned. Two Cossacks held his arms and helped him into the saddle.

He announced to Father Garasim that he would dine at his house. At this moment arose a woman's heartrending shrieks. Some robbers were dragging to the steps Vassilissa Igorofna, with dishevelled hair and half-dressed. One of them had already appropriated her cloak; the others were carrying off the mattresses, boxes, linen, tea sets, and all manner of things.

“Oh, my fathers!” cried the poor old woman. “Let me alone, I pray you; my fathers, my fathers, bring me to Ivan Kouzmitch.” All of a sudden she perceived the gallows and recognized her husband. “Villains!” she exclaimed, beside herself; “what have you done? Oh, my light, my Ivan Kouzmitch! Bold soldier heart, neither Prussian bayonets nor



Turkish bullets ever harmed you; and you have died before a vile runaway felon.”

“Silence the old witch,” said Pugatchef.

A young Cossack struck her with his sword on the head, and she fell dead at the foot of the steps. Pugatchef went away, all the people crowding in his train.



CHAPTER VIII. THE UNEXPECTED VISIT.

THE SQUARE REMAINED EMPTY. I stood in the same place, unable to collect my thoughts, disturbed by so many terrible events.

My uncertainty about Marya Ivanofna's fate tormented me more than I can say. Where was she? What had become of her? Had she had time to hide herself? Was her place of refuge safe and sure? Full of these oppressive thoughts, I went to the Commandant's house. All was empty. The chairs, the tables, the presses were burned, and the crockery in bits; the place was in dreadful disorder. I quickly ran up the little stair which led to Marya's room, where I was about to enter for the first time in my life.

Her bed was topsy-turvy, the press open and ransacked. A lamp still burned before the "*kivott*" equally empty; but a small looking-glass hanging between the door and window had not been taken away. What had become of the inmate of this simple maiden's cell? A terrible apprehension crossed my mind. I thought of Marya in the hands of the robbers. My heart failed me; I burst into tears and murmured the name of my loved one. At this moment I heard a slight noise, and Polashka, very pale, came out from behind the press.

"Oh, Petr' Andrejitch," said she, wringing her hands; "what a day, what horrors!"



“Marya Ivanofna,” cried I, impatiently, “where is Marya Ivanofna?”

“The young lady is alive,” replied Polashka; “she is hidden at Akoulina Pamphilovna's.”

“In the pope's house!” I exclaimed, affrighted. “Good God! Pugatchef is there!”

I rushed out of the room, in two jumps I was in the street and running wildly towards the pope's house. From within there resounded songs, shouts, and bursts of laughter; Pugatchef was at the table with his companions. Polashka had followed me; I sent her secretly to call aside Akoulina Pamphilovna. The next minute the pope's wife came out into the ante-room, an empty bottle in her hand.

“In heaven's name where is Marya Ivanofna?” I asked, with indescribable agitation.

“She is in bed, the little dove,” replied the pope's wife, “in my bed, behind the partition. Ah! Petr' Andrejitch, a misfortune very nearly happened. But, thank God, all has passed happily over. The villain had scarcely sat down to table before the poor darling began to moan. I nearly died of fright. He heard her.”

“‘Who is that moaning, old woman?’ said he.

“I saluted the robber down to the ground.

“‘My niece, Tzar; she has been ill and in bed for more than a week.’

“‘And your niece, is she young?’

“‘She is young, Tzar.’



“Let us see, old woman; show me your niece.’

“I felt my heart fail me; but what could I do?

“Very well, Tzar; but the girl is not strong enough to rise and come before your grace.’

“That's nothing, old woman; I'll go myself and see her.’

“And, would you believe it, the rascal actually went behind the partition. He drew aside the curtain, looked at her with his hawk's eyes, and nothing more; God helped us. You may believe me when I say the father and I were already prepared to die the death of martyrs. Luckily the little dove did not recognize him. O, Lord God! what have we lived to see! Poor Ivan Kouzmitch! who would have thought it! And Vassilissa Igorofna and Iwan Ignatiitch! Why him too? And you, how came it that you were spared? And what do you think of Chvabrine, of Alexy Ivanytch? He has cut his hair short, and he is there having a spree with them. He is a sly fox, you'll agree. And when I spoke of my sick niece, would you believe it, he looked at me as if he would like to run me through with his knife. Still, he did not betray us, and I'm thankful to him for that!”

At this moment up rose the vinous shouts of the guests and the voice of Father Garasim. The guests wanted more wine, and the pope was calling his wife.

“Go home, Petr' Andrejitch,” she said to me, in great agitation, “I have something else to do than chatter to you. Some ill will befall you if you come across any of them now.



Good-bye, Petr' Andrejitch. What must be, must be; and it may be God will not forsake us.”

The pope's wife went in; a little relieved, I returned to my quarters. Crossing the square I saw several Bashkirs crowding round the gallows in order to tear off the high boots of the hanged men. With difficulty I forbore showing my anger, which I knew would be wholly useless.

The robbers pervaded the fort, and were plundering the officers' quarters, and the shouts of the rebels making merry were heard everywhere. I went home. Saveliitch met me on the threshold.

“Thank heaven!” cried he, upon seeing me, “I thought the villains had again laid hold on you. Oh! my father, Petr' Andrejitch, would you believe it, the robbers have taken everything from us: clothes, linen, crockery and goods; they have left nothing. But what does it matter? Thank God that they have at least left you your life! But oh! my master, did you recognize their '*ataman*'?”

“No, I did not recognize him. Who is he?”

“What, my little father, you have already forgotten the drunkard who did you out of your *touloup* the day of the snowstorm, a hareskin *touloup*, brand new. And he, the rascal, who split all the seams putting it on.”

I was dumbfounded. The likeness of Pugatchef to my guide was indeed striking. I ended by feeling certain that he and Pugatchef were one and the same man, and I then understood



why he had shown me mercy. I was filled with astonishment at the extraordinary connection of events. A boy's *touloup*, given to a vagabond, saved my neck from the hangman, and a drunken frequenter of pothouses besieged forts and shook the Empire.

“Will you not eat something?” asked Saveliitch, faithful to his old habits. “There is nothing in the house, it is true; but I shall look about everywhere, and I will get something ready for you.”

Left alone, I began to reflect. What could I do? To stay in the fort, which was now in the hands of the robber, or to join his band were courses alike unworthy of an officer. Duty prompted me to go where I could still be useful to my country in the critical circumstances in which it was now situated.

But my love urged me no less strongly to stay by Marya Ivanofna, to be her protector and her champion. Although I foresaw a new and inevitable change in the state of things, yet I could not help trembling as I thought of the dangers of her situation.

My reflections were broken by the arrival of a Cossack, who came running to tell me that the great Tzar summoned me to his presence.

“Where is he?” I asked, hastening to obey.

“In the Commandant's house,” replied the Cossack. “After dinner our father went to the bath; now he is resting. Ah, sir! you can see he is a person of importance—he deigned at dinner to eat two roast sucking-pigs; and then he went into the upper



part of the vapour-bath, where it was so hot that Tarass Kurotchkin himself could not stand it; he passed the broom to Bikbaieff, and only recovered by dint of cold water. You must agree; his manners are very majestic, and in the bath, they say, he showed his marks of Tzar—on one of his breasts a double-headed eagle as large as a petak, and on the other his own face.”

I did not think it worth while to contradict the Cossack, and I followed him into the Commandant's house, trying to imagine beforehand my interview with Pugatchef, and to guess how it would end.

The reader will easily believe me when I say that I did not feel wholly reassured.

It was getting dark when I reached the house of the Commandant.

The gallows, with its victims, stood out black and terrible; the body of the Commandant's poor wife still lay beneath the porch, close by two Cossacks, who were on guard.

He who had brought me went in to announce my arrival. He came back almost directly, and ushered me into the room where, the previous evening, I had bidden good-bye to Marya Ivanofna.

I saw a strange scene before me. At a table covered with a cloth and laden with bottles and glasses was seated Pugatchef, surrounded by ten Cossack chiefs, in high caps and coloured shirts, heated by wine, with flushed faces and sparkling eyes. I



did not see among them the new confederates lately sworn in, the traitor Chvabrine and the *ouriadnik*.

“Ah, ah! so it is you, your lordship,” said Pugatchef, upon seeing me. “You are welcome. All honour to you, and a place at our feast.”

The guests made room. I sat down in silence at the end of the table.

My neighbour, a tall and slender young Cossack, with a handsome face, poured me out a bumper of brandy, which I did not touch. I was busy noting the company.

Pugatchef was seated in the place of honour, his elbows on the table, and resting his black beard on his broad fist. His features, regular and agreeable, wore no fierce expression. He often addressed a man of about fifty years old, calling him sometimes Count, sometimes Timofeitsh, sometimes Uncle.

Each man considered himself as good as his fellow, and none showed any particular deference to their chief. They were talking of the morning's assault, of the success of the revolt, and of their forthcoming operations.

Each man bragged of his prowess, proclaimed his opinions, and freely contradicted Pugatchef. And it was decided to march upon Orenburg, a bold move, which was nearly crowned with success. The departure was fixed for the day following.

The guests drank yet another bumper, rose from table, and took leave of Pugatchef. I wished to follow them, but Pugatchef said—



“Stay there, I wish to speak to you!”

We remained alone together, and for a few moments neither spoke.

Pugatchef looked sharply at me, winking from time to time his left eye with an indefinable expression of slyness and mockery. At last he gave way to a long burst of laughter, and that with such unfeigned gaiety that I myself, regarding him, began to laugh without knowing why.

“Well, your lordship,” said he, “confess you were afraid when my fellows cast the rope about your neck. I warrant the sky seemed to you the size of a sheepskin. And you would certainly have swung beneath the cross-beam but for your old servant. I knew the old owl again directly. Well, would you ever have thought, sir, that the man who guided you to a lodging in the steppe was the great Tzar himself?” As he said these words he assumed a grave and mysterious air. “You are very guilty as regards me,” resumed he, “but I have pardoned you on account of your courage, and because you did me a good turn when I was obliged to hide from my enemies. But you shall see better things; I will load you with other favours when I shall have recovered my empire. Will you promise to serve me zealously?”

The robber's question and his impudence appeared to be so absurd that I could not restrain a smile.

“Why do you laugh?” he asked, frowning. “Do you not believe me to be the great Tzar? Answer me frankly.”



I did not know what to do. I could not recognize a vagabond as Emperor; such conduct was to me unpardonably base. To call him an impostor to his face was to devote myself to death; and the sacrifice for which I was prepared on the gallows, before all the world, and in the first heat of my indignation, appeared to me a useless piece of bravado. I knew not what to say.

Pugatchef awaited my reply in fierce silence. At last (and I yet recall that moment with satisfaction) the feeling of duty triumphed in me over human weakness, and I made reply to Pugatchef—

“Just listen, and I will tell you the whole truth. You shall be judge. Can I recognize in you a Tzar? You are a clever man; you would see directly that I was lying.”

“Who, then, am I, according to you?”

“God alone knows; but whoever you be, you are playing a dangerous game.”

Pugatchef cast at me a quick, keen glance.

“You do not then think that I am the Tzar Peter? Well, so let it be. Is there no chance of success for the bold? In former times did not Grischka Otrepieff reign? Think of me as you please, but do not leave me. What does it matter to you whether it be one or the other? He who is pope is father. Serve me faithfully, and I will make you a field-marshal and a prince. What do you say to this?”



“No,” I replied, firmly. “I am a gentleman. I have sworn fidelity to Her Majesty the Tzarina; I cannot serve you. If you really wish me well, send me back to Orenburg.”

Pugatchef reflected.

“But if I send you away,” said he, “will you promise me at least not to bear arms against me?”

“How can you expect me to promise you that?” replied I. “You know yourself that that does not depend upon me. If I be ordered to march against you I must submit. You are a chief now—you wish your subordinates to obey you. How can I refuse to serve if I am wanted? My head is at your disposal; if you let me go free, I thank you; if you cause me to die, may God judge you. Howbeit, I have told you the truth.”

My outspoken candour pleased Pugatchef.

“E'en so let it be,” said he, clapping me on the shoulder; “either entirely punish or entirely pardon. Go to the four winds and do what seems good in your eyes, but come to-morrow and bid me good-bye; and now begone to bed—I am sleepy myself.”

I left Pugatchef, and went out into the street. The night was still and cold, the moon and stars, sparkling with all their brightness, lit up the square and the gallows. All was quiet and dark in the rest of the fort. Only in the tavern were lights still to be seen, and from within arose the shouts of the lingering revellers.

I threw a glance at the pope's house. The doors and the shutters were closed; all seemed perfectly quiet there. I went



home and found Saveliitch deploring my absence. The news of my regained liberty overwhelmed him with joy.

“Thanks be to Thee, O Lord!” said he, making the sign of the cross. “We will leave the fort to-morrow at break of day and we will go in God's care. I have prepared something for you; eat, my father, and sleep till morning quietly, as though in the pocket of Christ!”

I took his advice, and, after having supped with a good appetite, I went to sleep on the bare boards, as weary in mind as in body.



CHAPTER IX. THE PARTING.

THE DRUM AWOKE ME very early, and I went to the Square. There the troops of Pugatchef were beginning to gather round the gallows where the victims of the preceding evening still hung. The Cossacks were on horseback, the foot-soldiers with their arms shouldered, their colours flying in the air.

Several cannons, among which I recognized ours, were placed on field-gun carriages. All the inhabitants had assembled in the same place, awaiting the usurper. Before the door of the Commandant's house a Cossack held by the bridle a magnificent white horse of Kirghiz breed. I sought with my eyes the body of the Commandant's wife; it had been pushed aside and covered over with an old bark mat.

At last Pugatchef came out of the house. All the crowd uncovered. Pugatchef stopped on the doorstep and said good-morning to everybody. One of the chiefs handed him a bag filled with small pieces of copper, which he began to throw broadcast among the people, who rushed to pick them up, fighting for them with blows.

The principal confederates of Pugatchef surrounded him. Among them was Chvabrine. Our eyes met; he could read contempt in mine, and he looked away with an expression of deep hatred and pretended mockery. Seeing me in the crowd Pugatchef beckoned to me and called me up to him.



“Listen,” said he, “start this very minute for Orenburg. You will tell the governor and all the generals from me that they may expect me in a week. Advise them to receive me with submission and filial love; if not, they will not escape a terrible punishment. A good journey, to your lordship.”

Then turning to the people, he pointed out Chvabrine.

“There, children,” said he, “is your new Commandant; obey him in all things; he answers to me for you and the fort.”

I heard these words with affright. Chvabrine become master of the place! Marya remained in his power! Good God! what would become of her? Pugatchef came down the steps, his horse was brought round, he sprang quickly into the saddle, without waiting for the help of the Cossacks prepared to aid him.

At this moment I saw my Saveliitch come out of the crowd, approach Pugatchef, and present him with a sheet of paper. I could not think what it all meant.

“What is it?” asked Pugatchef, with dignity.

“Deign to read it, and you will see,” replied Saveliitch.

Pugatchef took the paper and looked at it a long time with an air of importance. At last he said—

“You write very illegibly; our lucid eyes cannot make out anything. Where is our Chief Secretary?”

A youth in a corporal's uniform ran up to Pugatchef.

“Read it aloud,” the usurper said to him, handing him the paper.



I was extremely curious to know on what account my retainer had thought of writing to Pugatchef. The Chief Secretary began in a loud voice, spelling out what follows—

“Two dressing gowns, one cotton, the other striped silk, six roubles.”

“What does that mean?” interrupted Pugatchef, frowning.

“Tell him to read further,” rejoined Saveliitch, quite unmoved.

The Chief Secretary continued to read—

“One uniform of fine green cloth, seven roubles; one pair trousers, white cloth, five roubles; twelve shirts of Holland shirting, with cuffs, ten roubles; one box with tea service, two-and-a-half roubles.”

“What is all this nonsense?” cried Pugatchef. “What do these tea-boxes and breeches with cuffs matter to me?”

Saveliitch cleared his throat with a cough, and set to work to explain matters.

“Let my father condescend to understand that that is the bill of my master's goods which have been taken away by the rascals.”

“What rascals?” quoth Pugatchef, in a fierce and terrible manner.

“Beg pardon, my tongue played me false,” replied Saveliitch. “Rascals, no they are not rascals; but still your fellows have well harried and well robbed, you must agree. Do



not get angry; the horse has four legs, and yet he stumbles. Bid him read to the end.”

“Well, let us see, read on,” said Pugatchef.

The Secretary continued—

“One chintz rug, another of wadded silk, four roubles; one pelisse fox skin lined with red ratteen, forty roubles; and lastly, a small hareskin *touloup*, which was left in the hands of your lordship in the wayside house on the steppe, fifteen roubles.”

“What's that?” cried Pugatchef, whose eyes suddenly sparkled.

I confess I was in fear for my poor follower. He was about to embark on new explanations when Pugatchef interrupted him.

“How dare you bother me with such nonsense?” cried he, snatching the paper out of the hands of the Secretary and throwing it in Saveliitch's face. “Foolish old man, you have been despoiled; well, what does it signify. But, old owl, you should eternally pray God for me and my lads that you and your master do not swing up there with the other rebels. A hareskin *touloup*! Hark ye, I'll have you flayed alive that *touloups* may be made of your skin.”

“As it may please you!” replied Saveliitch. “But I am not a free man, and I must answer for my lord's goods.”

Pugatchef was apparently in a fit of high-mindedness. He turned aside his head, and went off without another word.



Chvabrine and the chiefs followed him. All the band left the fort in order. The people escorted it.

I remained alone in the square with Saveliitch. My follower held in his hand the memorandum, and was contemplating it with an air of deep regret. Seeing my friendly understanding with Pugatchef, he had thought to turn it to some account. But his wise hope did not succeed. I was going to scold him sharply for his misplaced zeal, and I could not help laughing.

“Laugh, sir, laugh,” said Saveliitch; “but when you are obliged to fit up your household anew, we shall see if you still feel disposed to laugh.”

I ran to the pope's house to see Marya Ivanofna. The pope's wife came to meet me with a sad piece of news. During the night high fever had set in, and the poor girl was now delirious. Akoulina Pamphilovna brought me to her room. I gently approached the bed. I was struck by the frightful change in her face. The sick girl did not know me. Motionless before her, it was long ere I understood the words of Father Garasim and his wife, who apparently were trying to comfort me.

Gloomy thoughts overwhelmed me. The position of a poor orphan left solitary and friendless in the power of rascals filled me with fear, while my own powerlessness equally distressed me; but Chvabrine, Chvabrine above all, filled me with alarm. Invested with all power by the usurper, and left master in the fort, with the unhappy girl, the object of his hatred, he was capable of anything. What should I do? How could I help her?



How deliver her? Only in one way, and I embraced it. It was to start with all speed for Orenburg, so as to hasten the recapture of Belogorsk, and to aid in it if possible.

I took leave of the pope and of Akoulina Pamphilovna, recommending warmly to them her whom I already regarded as my wife. I seized the hand of the young girl and covered it with tears and kisses.

“Good-bye,” the pope's wife said to me, as she led me away. “Good-bye, Petr' Andrejitch; perhaps we may meet again in happier times. Don't forget us, and write often to us. Except you, poor Marya Ivanofna has no longer stay or comforter.”

Out in the Square I stopped a minute before the gallows, which I respectfully saluted, and I then took the road to Orenburg, accompanied by Saveliitch, who did not forsake me.

As I thus went along, deep in thought, I heard all at once a horse galloping behind me. I turned round, and saw a Cossack coming up from the fort, leading a Bashkir horse, and making signs to me from afar to wait for him. I stopped, and soon recognized our *ouriadnik*.

After joining us at a gallop, he jumped from the back of his own horse, and handing me the bridle of the other—

“Your lordship,” said he, “our father makes you a present of a horse, and a pelisse from his own shoulder.” On the saddle was slung a plain sheepskin *touloup*. “And, besides,” added he, hesitatingly, “he gives you a half-rouble, but I have lost it by the way; kindly excuse it.”



Saveliitch looked askance at him.

“You have lost it by the way,” said he, “and pray what is that which jingles in your pocket, barefaced liar that you are?”

“Jingling in my pocket?” replied the *ouriadnik*, not a whit disconcerted; “God forgive you, old man, 'tis a bridlebit, and never a half rouble.”

“Well! well!” said I, putting an end to the dispute. “Thank from me he who sent you: and you may as well try as you go back to find the lost half rouble and keep it for yourself.”

“Many thanks, your lordship,” said he, turning his horse round; “I will pray God for ever for you.”

With these words, he started off at a gallop, keeping one hand on his pocket, and was soon out of sight. I put on the *touloup* and mounted the horse, taking up Saveliitch behind me.

“Don't you see, your lordship,” said the old man, “that it was not in vain that I presented my petition to the robber? The robber was ashamed of himself, although this long and lean Bashkir hoss and this peasant's *touloup* be not worth half what those rascals stole from us, nor what you deigned to give him as a present, still they may be useful to us. 'From an evil dog be glad of a handful of hairs.'”



CHAPTER X. THE SIEGE.

AS WE APPROACHED ORENBURG we saw a crowd of convicts with cropped heads, and faces disfigured by the pincers of the executioner.

They were working on the fortifications of the place under the pensioners of the garrison. Some were taking away in wheelbarrows the rubbish which filled the ditch; others were hollowing out the earth with spades. Masons were bringing bricks and repairing the walls.

The sentries stopped us at the gates to demand our passports.

When the Sergeant learnt that we came from Fort Belogorsk he took us direct to the General.

I found him in his garden. He was examining the apple-trees which the breath of autumn had already deprived of their leaves, and, with the help of an old gardener, he was enveloping them in straw. His face expressed calm, good-humour and health.

He seemed very pleased to see me, and began to question me on the terrible events which I had witnessed. I related them.

The old man heard me with attention, and, while listening, cut the dead branches.

“Poor Mironoff!” said he, when I had done my sad story; “’tis a pity! he was a goot officer! And Matame Mironoff, she was



a goot lady and first-rate at pickled mushrooms. And what became of Masha, the Captain's daughter?"

I replied that she had stayed in the fort, at the pope's house.

"Aie! aie! aie!" said the General. "That's bad! very bad; it is quite impossible to count on the discipline of robbers."

I drew his attention to the fact that Fort Belogorsk was not very far away, and that probably his excellency would not delay dispatching a detachment of troops to deliver the poor inhabitants.

The General shook his head with an air of indecision—

"We shall see! we shall see!" said he, "we have plenty of time to talk about it. I beg you will come and take tea with me. This evening there will be a council of war; you can give us exact information about that rascal Pugatchef and his army. Now in the meantime go and rest."

I went away to the lodging that had been assigned me, and where Saveliitch was already installed. There I impatiently awaited the hour fixed.

The reader may well believe I was anxious not to miss this council of war, which was to have so great an influence on my life. I went at the appointed hour to the General's, where I found one of the civil officials of Orenburg, the head of the Customs, if I recollect right, a little old man, fat and red-faced, dressed in a coat of watered silk.



He began questioning me on the fate of Ivan Kouzmitch, whom he called his gossip, and he often interrupted me by many questions and sententious remarks, which if they did not show a man versed in the conduct of war, yet showed that he was possessed of natural wit, and of intelligence. During this time the other guests had assembled. When all were seated, and each one had been offered a cup of tea, the General explained lengthily and minutely what was the affair in hand.

“Now, gentlemen, we must decide how we mean to act against the rebels. Shall it be offensively or defensively? Each way has its disadvantages and its advantages. Offensive warfare offers more hope of the enemy being speedily crushed; but a defensive war is surer and less dangerous. Consequently we will collect the votes according to the proper order, that is to say, begin first consulting the juniors in respect of rank. Now, Mr. Ensign,” continued he, addressing me, “be so good as to give us your opinion.”

I rose, and after having depicted in a few words Pugatchef and his band, I declared that the usurper was not in a state to resist disciplined troops. My opinion was received by the civil officials with visible discontent.

They saw in it the headstrong impertinence of youth.

A murmur arose, and I distinctly heard said, half-aloud, the words, “Beardless boy.” The General turned towards me, and smilingly said—



“Mr. Ensign, the early votes in a council of war are generally for offensive measures. Now we will proceed. Mr. College Counsellor, tell us your opinion?”

The little old man in the watered silk coat made haste to swallow his third cup of tea, which he had mixed with a good help of rum.

“I think, your excellency,” said he, “we must neither act on the defensive nor yet on the offensive.”

“How so, Mr. Counsellor?” replied the General, astounded. “There is nothing else open to us in tactics—one must act either on the defensive or the offensive.”

“Your excellency, endeavour to suborn.”

“Eh! eh! your opinion is very judicious; the act of corruption is one admitted by the rules of war, and we will profit by your counsel. We might offer for the rascal's head seventy or even a hundred roubles, and take them from the secret funds.”

“And then,” interrupted the head of the Customs, “I'm a Kirghiz instead of a College Counsellor if these robbers do not deliver up their ataman, chained hand and foot.”

“We will think of it, and talk of it again,” rejoined the General. “Still, in any case, we must also take military measures. Gentlemen, give your votes in proper order.”

Everyone's opinion was contrary to mine. Those present vied with each other about the untrustworthiness of the troops, the uncertainty of success, the necessity of prudence, and so



forth. All were of opinion that it was better to stay behind a strong wall, their safety assured by cannon, than to tempt the fortune of war in the open field.

At last, when all the opinions had been given, the General shook the ashes out of his pipe and made the following speech:—

“Gentlemen, I must tell you, for my part, I am entirely of the opinion of our friend the ensign, for this opinion is based on the precepts of good tactics, in which nearly always offensive movements are preferable to defensive ones.” Here he paused a moment and filled his pipe. My self-love was triumphant, and I cast a proud glance at the civil officials who were whispering among themselves, with an air of disquiet and discontent. “But, gentlemen,” resumed the General, with a sigh, and puffing out a cloud of smoke, “I dare not take upon myself such a great responsibility, when the safety is in question of the provinces entrusted to my care by Her Imperial Majesty, my gracious Sovereign. Therefore I see I am obliged to abide by the advice of the majority, which has ruled that prudence as well as reason declares that we should await in the town the siege which threatens us, and that we should defeat the attacks of the enemy by the force of artillery, and, if the possibility present itself, by well-directed sorties.”

It was now the turn of the officials to look mockingly at me. The council broke up. I could not help deploring the weakness of the honest soldier who, against his own judgment, had



decided to abide by the counsel of ignorant and inexperienced people.

Several days after this memorable council of war, Pugatchef, true to his word, approached Orenburg. From the top of the city wall I took note of the army of the rebels, and it seemed to me that their number had increased tenfold since the last assault I had witnessed. They had also artillery, which had been taken from the little forts which had fallen before Pugatchef. As I recollected the decision of the council of war, I foresaw a long imprisonment within the walls of Orenburg, and I was ready to cry with vexation.

Far be from me any intention of describing the siege of Orenburg, which belongs to history, and not to a family memoir. In a few words, therefore, I shall say that in consequence of the bad arrangements of the authorities, the siege was disastrous for the inhabitants, who were forced to suffer hunger and privation of all kinds. Life at Orenburg was becoming unendurable; each one awaited in anxiety the fate that should befall him. All complained of the famine, which was, indeed, awful.

The inhabitants ended by becoming accustomed to the shells falling on their houses. Even the assaults of Pugatchef no longer excited great disturbance. I was dying of ennui. The time passed but slowly. I could not get any letter from Belogorsk, for all the roads were blocked, and the separation from Marya



became unbearable. My only occupation consisted in my military rounds.

Thanks to Pugatchef, I had a pretty good horse, with which I shared my scanty rations. Every day I passed beyond the ramparts, and I went and fired away against the scouts of Pugatchef. In these sort of skirmishes the rebels generally got the better of us, as they had plenty of food and were capitally mounted.

Our thin, starved cavalry was unable to stand against them. Sometimes our famished infantry took the field, but the depth of the snow prevented action with any success against the flying cavalry of the enemy. The artillery thundered vainly from the height of the ramparts, and in the field guns could not work because of the weakness of the worn-out horses. This is how we made war, and this is what the officials of Orenburg called prudence and foresight.

One day, when we had succeeded in dispersing and driving before us a rather numerous band, I came up with one of the hindmost Cossacks, and I was about to strike him with my Turkish sabre when he took off his cap and cried—

“Good day, Petr' Andrejitch; how is your health?”

I recognized our *ouriadnik*. I cannot say how glad I was to see him.

“Good day, Maximitch,” said I, “is it long since you left Belogorsk?”



“No, not long, my little father, Petr' Andrejitch; I only came back yesterday. I have a letter for you.”

“Where is it?” I cried, overjoyed.

“I have got it,” rejoined Maximitch, putting his hand into his breast. “I promised Palashka to give it to you.”

He handed me a folded paper, and immediately darted off at full gallop. I opened it and read with emotion the following lines—

“It has pleased God to deprive me at once of my father and my mother. I have no longer on earth either parents or protectors. I have recourse to you, because I know you have always wished me well, and also that you are ever ready to help those in need. I pray God this letter may reach you. Maximitch has promised me he will ensure it reaching you. Palashka has also heard Maximitch say that he often sees you from afar in the sorties, and that you do not take care of yourself, nor think of those who pray God for you with tears.

“I was long ill, and when at last I recovered, Alexey Ivanytch, who commands here in the room of my late father, forced Father Garasim to hand me over to him by threatening him with Pugatchef. I live under his guardianship in our house. Alexey Ivanytch tries to oblige me to marry him. He avers that he saved my life by not exposing Akoulina Pamphilovna's stratagem when she spoke of me to the robbers as her niece, but it would be easier to me to die than to become the wife of a man like Chvabrine. He treats me with great cruelty, and threatens, if



I do not change my mind, to bring me to the robber camp, where I should suffer the fate of Elizabeth Kharloff.

“I have begged Alexey Ivanytch to give me some time to think it over. He has given me three days; if at the end of that time I do not become his wife I need expect no more consideration at his hands. Oh! my father, Petr' Andrejitch, you are my only stay. Defend me, a poor girl. Beg the General and all your superiors to send us help as soon as possible, and come yourself if you can.

“I remain, your submissive orphan,

“MARYA MIRONOFF.”

I almost went mad when I read this letter. I rushed to the town, spurring without pity my poor horse. During the ride I turned over in my mind a thousand projects for rescuing the poor girl without being able to decide on any. Arrived in the town I went straight to the General's, and I actually ran into his room. He was walking up and down, smoking his meerschaum pipe. Upon seeing me he stood still; my appearance doubtless struck him, for he questioned me with a kind of anxiety on the cause of my abrupt entry.

“Your excellency,” said I, “I come to you as I would to my poor father. Do not reject my request; the happiness of my whole life is in question.”

“What is all this, my father?” asked the astounded General. “What can I do for you? Speak.”



“Your excellency, allow me to take a battalion of soldiers and fifty Cossacks, and go and clear out Fort Belogorsk.”

The General stared, thinking, probably, that I was out of my senses; and he was not far wrong.

“How? What! what! Clear out Fort Belogorsk!” he said at last.

“I'll answer for success!” I rejoined, hotly. “Only let me go.”

“No, young man,” he said, shaking his head; “it is so far away. The enemy would easily block all communication with the principal strategic point, which would quickly enable him to defeat you utterly and decisively. A blocked communication, do you see?”

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I took fright when I saw he was getting involved in a military dissertation, and I made haste to interrupt him.

“The daughter of Captain Mironoff,” I said, “has just written me a letter asking for help. Chvabrine is obliging her to become his wife.”

“Indeed! Oh! this Chvabrine is a great rascal. If he falls into my hands I'll have him tried in twenty-four hours, and we will shoot him on the glacis of the fort. But in the meantime we must have patience.”

“Have patience!” I cried, beside myself. “Between this and then he will ill-treat Marya.”

“Oh!” replied the General. “Still that would not be such a terrible misfortune for her. It would be better for her to be the wife of Chvabrine, who can now protect her. And when we shall have shot him, then, with heaven's help, the betrothed will come together again. Pretty little widows do not long remain single; I mean to say a widow more easily finds a husband.”

“I'd rather die,” I cried, furiously, “than leave her to Chvabrine.”

“Ah! Bah!” said the old man, “I understand now. Probably you are in love with Marya Ivanofna. Then it is another thing. Poor boy! But still it is not possible for me to give you a battalion and fifty Cossacks. This expedition is unreasonable, and I cannot take it upon my own responsibility.”



I bowed my head; despair overwhelmed me. All at once an idea flashed across me, and what it was the reader will see in the next chapter, as the old novelists used to say.

End of Book II.

