Frederick Ferdinand Moore

The Samovar Girl

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PROLOGUE

THE VALLEY OF DESPAIR

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Clank! Clank! Clank!

It was the music of chains. A column of unfortunates from the big prison on the hill swung down the road and turned into the wide street between the log houses. They were on their way out into the *taiga* to cut wood and hew timbers under a guard of Cossacks. The chains hanging from the wrists of the convicts to their ankles, crossed in front of them but hidden under the *khalats*—long gray capes worn by exiles—made the doleful music as the long line of marchers, gray as the cold fog of the morning, moved up the Czar's road and was lost in the frozen mists that masked the edge of the wilderness.

The sun was up, but it was only a patch of weak yellow light against the dull sky which roofed the Valley of Despair. Lowering wisps of fog still shrouded the hills about the exile settlement—fog that had lifted from the frozen and desolate reaches of the Ingoda, from the smoking huts of the tiny plain, from the snow-streaked slopes on which squatted like a hideous monster the great low, rambling prison of yellow-painted logs.

The morning was bitter cold. The streets were almost deserted. The windows of the log buildings still glowed with the dim yellow light of guttering candles behind the frost-

bound panes. White smoke from the chimneys of the houses and huts rose straight up into the air, for there was not even the ghost of a breeze. And the cold still air carried sounds with startling clearness—the tolling of a bell at lazy intervals, the barking of a dog, the distant cry of a wolf, and now the ringing clatter of axes being driven into frost-laden wood by the invisible exiles.

Shadows appeared at the windows frequently. For the Czar's mail was due this morning from Irkutsk, and the house-huddled people were waiting for the first tinkle of the sledge-bells. The mail! The mail from Moscow, from Petersburg, from Tambov, from the Valley of the Beloved Volga, so many heartbreaking versts away! The mail would bring life and death, joy and sorrow, sentence and pardon to Chita, in the Valley of Despair. The mail would bring the Czar's word, the heaven-sent mercy, or the curt condemnation. The mail, by the relays of sledges, was the reach of the scepter from the throne of majesty to the Valley of Despair in Siberia.

None listened more eagerly for the first jingle of the mail-sledges that morning than Peter, son of Peter, in the tiny hut of Gorekin the bootmaker, an exile but by the gracious compassion of the governor a member of the "free gang." Peter, son of Peter, was only ten years old. He worked with his father in the boxlike hut on the Sofistkaya, helping to make boots for the officers of the Czar and the Cossacks.

Peter's blue eyes were set deeply in his head, for he had never had enough to eat—not even enough sticky black bread, or enough *eèkrah* which is the raw, red eggs of the big salmon. Peter was a tall boy for his age, but not very

sturdy. His yellow hair was clipped close to his scalp, and his little round head was bent low while his hammer *tap-tapped* at the wooden pegs in the boot soles by the candlelight.

Peter's father was a political. He had been sent to Siberia for thinking—thinking about government, and inducing others to think. Which was foolish, for the Czar and his ministers settled all affairs of government for the good of the people. Yet God was good, for Peter's father had been admitted to the free gang because he could make boots, and so did not have to stay in the big prison on the hill. And Michael Alexandrovitch Kirsakoff, Excellence, and Czar's Governor, allowed Peter and his father to have a tiny hut to themselves—a place of one room, one window, a fire-pit with a stone chimney, and shelves against the log wall on which to sleep. They even had a battered brass samovar in which to boil water for their tea.

Peter's father was not old, though his back was bent by years in chains before Peter was born, and then by more years of stooping over a stitching-frame sewing boots. "Gorekin the old bootmaker," everybody called him, partly because his face was covered with a long and heavy beard, and partly because his eyes had such an old look in them—eyes which looked past everybody far into the future and seemed to be waiting for some strange vision to appear.

Peter was proud of his father, and loved him beyond expression. For his father knew everything—even knew how many versts it was to Moscow, information which many people gave money to know, and knowing, kept the secret for themselves. There are many things in an exile colony which it is forbidden to know, so whisper talk is bought and

sold, some dealing in secrets of a certain kind, and some selling coming news about revolutions.

Peter's little round head was always being puzzled, and his blue eyes were always full of questions. He loved the Czar, just as everybody else loved the Czar—only when there were no soldiers listening, or no secret police of the Third Division, men would swear bitter oaths in whispers against majesty. It was not easy to tell who might be secret police, for your friend to-day, talking against the government of the Czar, might to-morrow prove to be one of the Third Division, and then doors of the big prison on the hill would open for you, and dawn would meet you with an execution squad.

Peter could not remember his mother. She had followed his father into exile, and Peter had been born in The Street of the Dames. His mother had died that day. Peter's father said now it was just as well, for life was really death in the Valley of Despair. And though Peter was only ten, he already knew something of the bitterness of life. Had he not seen a man with a back all raw from whipping, who had escaped from the prison? Yes, he had come crawling to the bootmaker's hut, too weak to go on into the wilderness with the others who had escaped, and could only lie all night close to the fire-pit, waiting for the soldiers to come in the morning and take him away.

But there were pleasant things in life for Peter. There were the ladies who came from The Street of the Dames. They spoke Czar's Russian and were grand ladies. They came to have boots mended, but they stayed long and whispered much with Peter's father, winking and nodding

their heads about nothing at all. Sometimes they brought little cakes with spices in them, or a handful of dry tea, or a bit of sugar from China, or sweetened ginger-root. And sometimes they gave Peter as much as a ruble. Their husbands were up in the big prison on the hill, and the grand ladies had followed to the Valley of Despair and had built for themselves with their own hands a whole street of log houses.

And for some reason which Peter could never fathom, after these ladies from The Street of the Dames came to have their shoes mended, Peter's father always remembered that he had to go up to the prison with a pair of new boots for an officer, or to measure feet for a new pair, or to get some leather—always an errand. And the ladies would wait till he returned, when they cried quietly into their handkerchiefs, and after much whispering went away to their log houses.

But the greatest puzzle of all to Peter was that his father had been exiled for reading books, yet his father now read the Bible, which was a book, and told all about God and the Czar. But, of course, the Bible was always hidden behind the pile of wood close to the fire-pit.

And Peter's father read the almanacs which came every year from Moscow, and everybody knows an almanac is nothing more nor less than a book. Everybody had a new almanac every year, and wonderful books they were too, for they told about the sun, moon, and stars, the holy days of Holy Russia, the goodness and greatness of the Czar, the names and name days of grand dukes and grand duchesses and all the wonderful things they had done for the poor

people, and had pictures of saints, and depictions of miracles, pictures of watches which might be purchased in Moscow or Petrograd by people who were rich, and pictures of skeletons of dead men! Oh, the almanacs were wonderful!

Peter had worn his last year's one out from much reading of it by the fire of nights with his father. And now the new one from Moscow was two months late. That was why Peter watched so anxiously every morning for the mail-sledges from Irkutsk, which was on the Petersburg side of Lake Baikal.

So this morning he was pegging away fast with his hammer, his father working near by and whispering to himself, a way he had when busy. The candle was still guttering between them, the fire in the pit was smoking comfortably, and the old brass samovar was singing merrily on a shelf.

Peter leaned over from his bench every few minutes, to blow a hole in the frost on the windowpane, and look up the Sofistkaya in the direction of the post-house. But he could not see far yet, from the fog, though he did see the column of unfortunates going out into the wilderness with the Cossack soldiers.

Peter rather feared the Cossacks. They were "free men"—big swaggering fellows with blue breeches and yellow stripes on their tunics and some of them with colored tops in their tall *shlapkas*—round caps of fuzzy wool. And though Peter feared the Cossacks, he was also proud of them, for they were a part of Holy Russia and the power of the Czar flashed from the points of their lances as they

galloped over the plains. And the Czar was Ataman of all the Cossacks, just as he was Emperor of all Russians. And there were more Russians in the world than all other peoples put together, counting the barbarians of far lands across the seas.

Peter longed for the day when he would be big enough to become a soldier of majesty, and wear on his cap the little oval button—“The Eye of the Czar.” Then he would know all things. His father always smiled sadly at such ideas.

“Peter Petrovitch Gorekin, a soldier of the Czar!” Peter’s father would say. “A soldier against the people, a soldier to bind our chains the tighter! Oh, Peter Petrovitch! The day will come when your eye will see and understand!”

Which was a surprising thing for Peter’s father to say, for Peter could see well enough with his eyes, except when the smoke from the fire-pit blew down the stone chimney and got into his eyes while he was reading from the almanac and learning new words.

Peter’s father was most anxious for Peter to learn to read as well as the priest—yes, even as well as Michael Alexandrovitch Kirsakoff, the Colonel Governor. Peter could have made many kopecks in the evenings, helping to skin sheep for the butcher, but Peter’s father insisted upon lessons with the almanac by the fire.

“The labor of a man’s hands can be forced to do the will of a master,” his father would say gravely, “but the labor of a man’s head is his own, and no man can control it.”

Peter could not understand that, because it was impossible to drive pegs with one’s head—it could only be done with hands and the hammer. And his father worked

with his hands, too, and never did a thing with his head, or so Peter supposed.

It was not long after the column of unfortunates and Cossacks had disappeared into the *taiga* that Peter saw two black spots rise on the little hill across the Ingoda River, and drop again out of sight.

“Ee-yah!” cried Peter joyfully. “The mail comes!”

His father lifted his head and looked up from his stitching-frame to listen.

“I hear nothing but the music of the samovar,” he said.

“They have crossed the bend to the river,” insisted Peter. “I heard the bells and I saw the sledges! The horses are coming fast!”

Both sat still and listened, with only the snapping of the fire and the song of the samovar in their ears. Though they waited in silence, the sound of the bells did not come to them down the chimney.

“Watch the road,” said his father, and returned to his stitching. Peter put his eye to the hole in the frost and watched the street up beyond the post-house. But he saw only an occasional Buriat, or a Cossack striding along, with now and then a Tartar hunter coming in from the hills with raw fur thrown over his shoulders, and soldiers hurrying down from the prison above the settlement.

Then, the bells! The first faint jingle came to Peter’s ears, and at the same time he saw the galloping horses of the leading sledge come up into the road from the river hollow, running free for the post-house.

“Now!” cried Peter. “The post is here! With the new almanacs! Please! Give me the kopecks! And may I run to

see if the new almanac has come for sure?”

Peter’s father stopped work and filled his glass from the samovar, threw on the fire a fresh chunk of wood and dug some kopecks from his pocket.

“Go, little son, but dress warmly—it is too cold outside for a Tartar.”

Peter shoved his rag-bound feet into pink felt boots, whirled his long muffler about his neck and got into his gray coat. Pulling his cap over his head and ears, he took the kopecks from his father and flew out through the door in a cloud of white steam made by the warm air from inside the hut as it escaped into the frigid atmosphere outside.

Already the sledges had arrived in front of the post-house. The street was filled with people and there was a great to-do and gabbling. Peter could see the Cossack guards who had come with the sledges dismounting from their horses. The half-frozen drivers of the sledges were rolling stiffly out of their blankets, to clump through the icicle-fringed door of the post-house for their hot bowls of *borsht* and their drams of vodka.

Peter ran up to the crowd surrounding the sledges and breathlessly pushed in between the legs of the soldiers and onlookers. Surely, he thought, this month the almanacs must have come! Twice before he had been disappointed by the monthly mail and now he was shaking with eagerness. He wanted to cry out at once to those about the sledges, “Has the new almanac come?”

But there were no mail sacks on the first sledge. Instead it had five travelers—an old woman, an officer who was an aide of the Colonel Governor, two fur-buyers, and a little girl

—a pretty little girl, who was about the same age as Peter. She had pulled back her beautiful cap of ermine, and Peter could see the pink of her cheeks, her laughing blue eyes and the scarlet silk lining of her coat of sables where she had turned the collar away from her chin. She was standing up in the sledge and looking over the heads of the crowd and chattering with her old nurse in delight at having arrived back at her home.

Peter stared at the little girl. He knew who she was—Katerin Stephanovna Kirsakoff, daughter of the Colonel Governor. Peter had seen her many times driving through the settlement with her Cossack outriders guarding her. He knew she was kind to the poor people and to the unfortunates. On Butter Weeks she always threw silver kopecks from her carriage to the crowds at the fair. It was said that she knew even the Czar himself.

Peter thought Katerin was as beautiful as a picture in a holy icon. He almost forgot about his beloved almanacs as he stood and gazed at the beauty of Katerin. Her furs were so rich and gorgeous, her skin was so clear and rosy, her eyes were so sparkling bright. She had plenty of good things to eat, he was sure—and the cold did not hurt her, the guards of Cossacks protected her from the gaunt tigers in the hills, the officers bowed to her, the soldiers worshiped her, and she lived in the great and grand house of her father, the Colonel Governor, Michael Alexandrovitch Kirsakoff.

“The Governor comes!” rose the warning cry from those on the outer fringes of the throng about the sledges. The soldiers at once began to drive the people back from the

sledge in which Katerin was standing to clear the way for the droshky of the Colonel Governor.

Peter was inside the ring of people about the sledge. He was pushed away roughly. His heart sank, for he felt that he was to be cheated out of the news for which he had run to the post-house—news about the almanacs. He could restrain his eagerness no longer, and fearing that he would be left in doubt about the almanacs if the soldiers hustled him up the street with the other people, he ran from a soldier in toward the sledge, and making an obeisance to Excellence, raised his arms and cried out to Katerin, “Did your Excellence bring the almanacs of the new year?”

But Katerin did not hear him. She was standing up and clapping her hands as she saw her father’s droshky come whirling down the street toward her.

The officer in the sledge got out of the robes wound round him, and to the ground. He commanded the soldiers to drive the people away farther so the Colonel Governor might not be delayed in getting to his daughter.

Peter turned to run from this officer, but slipped and fell. And before he could regain his footing on the hard and slippery snow, the officer came hurrying from the sledge and tripped and fell over the boy—fell flat in the road before the post-house.

“Fool!” cried the officer, glaring at Peter. “Get away with you! You dare address Excellence, and now you are in my road!”

Peter stood up. The officer struck the boy in the face, and Peter fell again, almost stunned by the blow. He saw the officer’s boots stride away and recognized them as boots

which he and his father had made. There was a forest of boots in all directions, and the sound of voices reached Peter’s ears in a confused medley.

Peter was ashamed. The blood was flowing from his nose and making a mess on his chin and muffler. The tears which came into his eyes from the pain were freezing on his cheeks and his eyelids were freezing together, making a film through which he could see but dimly.

The crowd had drawn away from the sledge now, leaving Peter lying in the dirty snow. Such a sight to make of himself, he thought, in view of Katerin! And how angry she would be to see that he had gotten in the way of the officer and had made him fall down like a clumsy bear.

Peter heard the voice of his father calling to him.

“Little son! Get up quickly and run! The Governor comes! Do not let the Excellence see you there!”

But Peter could not move quickly for his arms and legs seemed strangely stiff and numb and helpless. His father ran out into the open space just as Governor Kirsakoff got out of his carriage to hasten to his little daughter in the sledge. He was a tall man, ruddy of face, with white teeth showing in a smile under black mustaches. He wore a high cap of sable with a badge of the Czar upon it. His longskirted coat of black was lined with fur which stuck out in fringes at the edges, and he wore a belt with silver doubleheaded eagles at the buckle. A scarlet strap depended from one shoulder and crossed his breast, and he wore a saber at his side—a saber with a gold hilt, bearing upon it the initials of his Emperor.

Governor Kirsakoff held out his arms toward his daughter as he approached the sledge. The officer who struck Peter was beside the Governor, with watchful eyes for the safety of his chief and the little girl.

Peter's father lifted him to his feet, and Peter brushed the icy film from his eyes.

"Get away, you and that boy!" the officer growled as the Governor strode swiftly to the sledge.

"The boy meant no harm, Excellence," said Peter's father, pulling off his cap and making a deep bow, as he tried to push Peter on before him.

"Who is this here?" demanded the Governor, catching sight of Peter and his father, and seeing that the boy's face was bleeding. Governor Kirsakoff's smile vanished, and he scowled angrily, sensing something in the nature of a calamity in the presence of his daughter.

"Excellence, this boy yelled at Katerin Stephanovna," explained the officer. "And he tripped my feet when I came down from the sledge."

Peter's father swept his cap to the ground in an abject bow.

"Pardon, Excellence—I will take the boy away."

"What now!" exclaimed Kirsakoff, with a close look at the bootmaker. "Is this Gorekin? Is this what I put you into the free gang for? to be under the feet of your Governor?"

Peter's father bowed once more.

"True, Excellence, I am Peter Pavlovitch Gorekin, the bootmaker."

"Then you should be at your boots and not under my feet!" raged Kirsakoff. "Do I give you the liberty of the

settlement to have you in the way with a bloody-nosed youngster when my little daughter comes home?" The Governor turned wrathfully to the commander of the Cossack guard about the sledges. "Take this Gorekin away to the prison!" he commanded.

"Excellence, my son!" cried Peter's father, stricken to his soul by the disaster in the Governor's order. "Oh, Excellence, I beg—if I go to the prison, what is to become of my son?"

"You should have prized your liberty and kept your son out of the way," said the Governor. "You think nothing of ruining the happiness of my little daughter! So your son must learn his place.——Take them both to the prison!"

And Kirsakoff turned away and hurried to the sledge.

"What has happened to the poor people?" asked Katerin, her face troubled as she watched Peter and his father. She saw that the boy had been hurt and was crying, and that the soldiers now menaced them.

"Do not look at them, little daughter," said Kirsakoff. "They have disobeyed the rules. Was it cold coming from Irkutsk? And did you bring me many kisses?"

The Governor lifted her out of the sledge and smothered her in his arms. At this moment a Cossack interposed himself between the bootmaker and the Governor, and two soldiers closed in on Peter and his father, their bayonets fixed upon their rifles.

Gorekin held up his hand in a plea to speak once more to the Governor. The bootmaker had dropped his cap, his face showed the agony of his despair, and the tears streamed

down his face. His mouth was open and his lips trembled with the chagrin and horror of what had befallen him.

“Excellence! I submit!” he pleaded. “But by the mercy of God, condemn not my son to the prison too!”

One of the Cossacks pushed him back violently so that he spun round and staggered blindly in an effort to keep his footing on the slippery snow. Then he turned with a cry and thrust the Cossack aside, to run after the Governor, hands stretched out in supplication.

“Mercy for my son!” he called after Kirsakoff.

A Cossack’s saber flashed, and Gorekin received its point in the back—once, twice—and with a scream, fell writhing on the snow-packed street before the post-house.

Kirsakoff ran with little Katerin in his arms toward the near-by droshky which was awaiting them. The crowd closed in at once about the stricken bootmaker and his son.

Little Peter fell to his knees beside his father, who had been rudely rolled upon his back by the Cossack with the saber. This Cossack searched hastily through the pockets of the greatcoat of Gorekin. Peter, screaming in terror, supposed that all this was being done to help his father.

The Cossack found the curved leather-knife of Gorekin in a pocket of the dying man’s coat, and flung the knife upon the ground. “He held this knife in his hand!” cried the Cossack. “It is the knife with which he would have killed the Governor!”

Peter could not realize yet the disaster which had come to him and his father. He knew only that the one human being who loved him, and whom he loved above everything in the world, was hurt and bleeding. The slowly reddening

snow beside his father gave the boy a vague idea of a wound which might in time be cured.

And it might not be real at all, this tragic morning, but a dream. Peter saw about him the black circle of boots like the trees of a forest; he saw the print of nails in the hard snow; he noted a small round stone close by his father's head—the world appeared to be full of trifling things, yet suddenly all trifles were invested with terror. He prayed even as he screamed, that he might wake to find his father reading from the new almanac beside the fire in their little hut.

"Little father! Little father!" he cried in his agony.

The bootmaker coughed harshly.

"He tried to kill the Governor," said a voice. "There lies the knife—and I ran him through with my saber."

Peter recognized the voice as that of the Cossack who had struck down his father.

"Little son—" gasped Gorekin, his dimming eyes on Peter, and his hand moving slowly toward the boy.

"Thou whom I love!" cried Peter, "come quickly for the man who has medicine and can cure you! Come to the watch-fixer who has the charms and the herbs!"

"God's blessing on you—I go—to meet—the—dead!" whispered Gorekin.

"You are not to die!" cried Peter, and flung himself down upon his father and kissed him. Then he sat back on his heels, moaning wildly as he saw his father's face graying to the color of the trampled snow.

"I shall kill Kirsakoff!" Peter shouted. "I shall kill—the Governor——!"

“Pray!” said his father weakly. “Pray to God for—power and—” but he could say no more, and making an effort to cross himself with both hands he died, staring up into the leaden sky.

“He is dead,” said a voice. “Take the boy to the prison. It is the order of the Governor.”

And Peter, sobbing and kicking out against the soldiers who grasped him and dragged him away, left his father lying in the snow before the post-house.

The soldiers dragged Peter up the Sofistkaya. His eyes clung to the mail bags being carried into the post-house, and though he was crying bitterly, he wondered if the almanacs had come from Moscow after all.

Next he knew he found himself in the sandy snow of the Sofistkaya, passing his own little hut, and saw the white smoke rising from the crude stone chimney. He thought of the samovar inside singing on a shelf, of the warmth and comfort that he would never know again, of his beloved father who somehow, by some terrible fate which had descended upon him out of the skies, was gone forever from the bench and the stitching-frame.

The two soldiers drove Peter on and in time they went over the wooden bridge across the frozen Ingoda, and up a hill. The tears on his face and frozen in his lids gave him great pain from cold. But he brushed his eyes clear of the ice particles and looked ahead. Before him were the yellow upright logs of the great prison stockade—and the great gate waiting to receive him into the Gethsemane of the Valley of Despair.

I

TWENTY YEARS AFTER

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KATERIN was awake before dawn. She lay still, listening in the dark for sounds of conflict in the city. For months she had been accustomed to the rattle of rifle-fire through day and night, and now she found it hard to realize that the looting and burning had ceased.

The windows of Katerin's room were hung with heavy blankets to conceal the candlelight by night, even though in the winter the glass of the panes was always nearly covered with heavy frost. She had no way of knowing how near it was to dawn, or if the day had come.

Katerin Stephanovna Kirsakoff—that was her full name. And she was hiding in an old log house with her father, who had been retired from the army of the Czar with the rank of general. And her father was Michael Alexandrovitch Kirsakoff, once Governor in the Valley of Despair, as it was known in the exile days before the revolution. And the log house was in Chita, where Kirsakoff had ruled his Cossacks, but Kirsakoff and his daughter were now hiding from the Cossacks.

Katerin rose from her bed, and guided by the dim, shaded flame burning before the icon in the corner of the room, she held out her arms to the image of the Virgin Mother, and whispered, "Save us, Mother of God, again this

day, from those who beset us, and bring to us help from our enemies in our time of danger!”

She continued to whisper her prayers while she dressed in the dark. Then she went to one of the windows and pulled aside the blanket. She scraped a tiny hole in the frost so that she might look down into the courtyard, to the end of the street and out over the plains which stretched away from the city toward the border of Manchuria, many versts away. In that direction lay safety, but Katerin knew that she could not get out of the city, much less cross those frozen plains.

The subdued light of morning coming in through the white frost on the panes revealed her as a woman of medium height, of figure slender and supple, and clad in a trailing velvet house-dress of wine-red. Thrown over her shoulders, and partly covering the faded velvet of the dress, was a sleeveless coat of sable. She had the oval, high-bred face of the untitled nobility of Russia. The Kirsakoffs were one of the old boyar families who had always served their emperors as officers and administrators in the empire which spanned half the world.

Katerin had inherited all the best qualities of her race and her class. As the daughter of General Kirsakoff she had grown up like an Imperial princess. Educated by tutors from Paris and Petersburg, she had also learned to ride like a Cossack. And as her mother had died when Katerin was a small girl, she had the poise of a woman, who, though still young, had presided over her father’s table in the Governor’s palace—the Government house. So all her life

she had been accustomed to a deference which was akin to that granted to royalty.

Now Katerin and her father were fugitives. The fighting between the various factions in Chita was over; the Cossacks were in control of the city—and controlling the Cossacks was a Mongol chieftain who had set himself up as the ruling prince and ruled with firing squads.

Months of terrorism in the city had made Katerin pale and wan. Her blue eyes were sad and deep set, and she had an expression of melancholy. The pallor of her cheeks was accentuated by her black hair, which was drawn down over her ears tightly. Her long neck, with its delicate lines, suggested pearls. She had pearls, but she did not dare wear them in these days. They were buried in the courtyard of the old log house.

When she walked it was with a slow and languorous grace. The carriage of her beautiful head was reminiscent of the portraits of the members of the Imperial family which had once hung on the walls of the home from which she had fled. It was now only a charred ruin.

Katerin remained at the window, peering out with anxious eyes. A trio of Cossack soldiers were huddled about the glowing remnants of their night-fire in the street. These were men in the army of the Ataman Zorogoff, the half-Mongol, half-Cossack *hetman* who ruled the Valley of Despair. The Ataman, in spite of his pretensions to leadership, was only a brigand with an army of adventurers and conscripts at his back, bent upon enriching himself by levying upon the fortunes of all the rich people in his

territory. And he collected the tribute which he exacted from them under threats of death—and by executions.

Katerin watched the gray light of the new day grow over the frozen and desolate landscape. A thin mantle of snow covered the plains below the hills which walled in the valley on three sides. There were a few rude peasants' huts out on the flats, with white smoke rising up from stone chimneys. A long column of staggering telegraph poles ran off beyond a spur of hill and marked the line of the railroad in this direction.

She saw a small band of Cossacks come galloping in toward the city. They were racing to the warmth of the barracks after a night spent on patrol. These men belonged to the outer cordon—the chain of mounted soldiers which Zorogoff kept about the city to make sure no one entered without his knowledge, and to insure that none escaped. Before he had organized his power, some of the wealthy citizens had escaped by the railroad, but now the Ataman had his troops on guard at the railroad station. And his spies were busy in the city. It was impossible to leave if he did not grant permission. The Kirsakoffs did not dare to ask for it.

The room in which Katerin stood looking out of the window was filled with a queer mingling of rich furnishings and crudely built peasant household goods. The floor was covered with a thick blue carpet, thrown down hastily after being smuggled by night from her old home before the building had been burned. Faithful servants had brought it, but there had been no attempt to put it down properly—it was merely tucked in at the sides of the room in order to make the fabric fit.

The walls were covered with an ancient and faded paper. The ceiling had once been covered with colorful decorations, but now the plaster was cracked, and leaks in the roof had turned the paint of the figures into grotesque patterns.

The bed was hidden by a Chinese screen of carved leather, also saved from the old home before the looters had plied the torch; a great samovar of chased and filigreed silver stood upon an old wooden bench brought from the kitchen on the floor below; a table of rough boards was covered by purple silk, and on it stood an ornate candelabra of marble and bronze with the arms sadly bent, so that the candles could not stand erect; blankets of fur covered chairs rudely cut with an ax and fashioned with a primitive hammer; and a monstrous black stove built into the wall reached to the ceiling.

Katerin pulled the blanket away from the window and made it fast to the casing with a string. Just then a gentle tapping came at one of the doors of the room. She laughed cheerily and opened the door. Her father stood before her.

General Kirsakoff was tall, but thin and bent with age. His face was gaunt, but the bones of his cheeks were partly concealed by a white beard which was indifferently trimmed to a point at the chin. His gray eyes were dim, yet held some of their old fire and the look of an eagle—stern eyes looking out from under gray brows and a forehead furrowed by worries and his years. His head was covered with sparse white hair, which had a tendency to stand straight up, and waved when he moved his head quickly.

“Ah, the cold is like a wolf!” said Michael, his hands clasped together as he shivered. “Has not Wassili come up

with the fire? My teeth ache from the cold!”

Katerin gave him a look of solicitude, and then took his hands and rubbed them.

“I thought you would sleep longer, so I did not call for Wassili. And here you are dressed—but you should have a blanket over your shoulders.”

“It is only my feet and my hands—and my teeth—that are cold. Let us have the samovar singing, and something hot. My poor old bones cannot stand the cold so well as they did. And this old house is damp—we must have a good fire to-day, happen what will.”

He looked at Katerin closely, searching her face for signs of anxiety, but her whole manner had changed at his entrance to the room, and now as she went to the door to the hallway to call down to Wassili, the servant, she hummed a tune. She knew her father well enough to understand that his spirit must be kept up. He had been giving way recently to long spells of despondency.

Michael was wearing one of his old uniforms of a general. It had been Katerin’s idea that he resume the discarded garments of authority, for she knew that he gained some comfort from it and that it helped him to forget the dark days which had come upon them. But Michael was only a shadow of his former self. His knees bent under him, his attenuated form did not fill the tunic, his hands were white and withered. They shook, as did his head at times, with the palsy of his age and feebleness. Yet the old general was still a striking figure in the gray tunic with the white cross hanging from its collar, the wreath and sword of another order of the Czar on his breast. A leather strap crossed his

shoulder and came down athwart the front of the tunic. The heavy gold straps on his shoulders marked his rank. His trousers were blue with a pair of narrow gold stripes at the sides, and the belt about him had a silver buckle in front with the double-headed eagle of the Romanoffs.

“So this is another day, little daughter,” said Michael, as he sat down upon a bench and stroked his beard. “Another day of waiting—waiting till these devils have lost their power to the army of the Emperor.”

“Another day of hope, my father,” said Katerin. “What! Does not the day at the windows give you courage. Perhaps the Americans will come up from Vladivostok and save us. It is then that Zorogoff will have to change his ways.”

“Poof! The Americans will not come,” said Michael wearily. “Do not put your hopes in the foreigners. Nothing will happen from that direction which will be of any good to us.”

“Something is bound to happen that is good for us,” insisted Katerin. “The forces of evil cannot always be in power. Have we not sent word to our friends who escaped? Will they not get our letters? Will they not do something to get us away from the city? All we must do is to have patience and be brave. God is with the brave.”

“Yes, the young are brave,” said Michael. “And it is you who are brave, my daughter. I am too old to have much heart left. But there are two things against us—one of them is our accursed money. I wish we had never saved it, but for that you will need it.”

“And what is the other thing that is against us?” asked Katerin with surprised eyes, as she turned to the door to

look below for Wassili.

“Your beauty, Katerin Stephanovna,” said her father. “How many times in the old days have I thanked the holy saints for your beauty! Yet I mourn now that you are so beautiful, for it may be your curse. I have had a dream of evil omen, yet I cannot remember it—though it left me downcast. If these devils of Zorogoff dare lay a hand upon you——”

Katerin ran to him and kissed him hastily.

“Oh, nonsense! I will not be so beautiful, and you will not be so depressed as soon as the samovar sings and you have had your tea. You make much of little things—and you must not keep dreams in your mind. Now! Here comes Wassili with the fire for the samovar!”

Wassili came in, a whiskered *moujik* in clumsy boots, bearing fire on a shovel. Some of the burning coals he put into the stove, and with the scattered remnants fired the samovar and went below again for water.

“It is more dangerous to give the money than to keep it,” went on Michael musingly. He seemed bent on studying out the problems which confronted him, as if the dream which he had mentioned had driven him into making some decision.

“If we could buy our way out of the city,” suggested Katerin, “I would be willing to give it up to see you in comfortable surroundings.” She was before a little mirror on a table, combing out her hair.

“Once Zorogoff had the money, he would destroy us so there would be no witness against him—no claim against him in future,” said Michael. “That is what happened to

Rioumines—he gave up his money willingly—and then he was killed. So there is no safety for us in beggaring ourselves. By the Holy Saints! I would rather burn all the rubles than give them to Zorogoff—but even then he would not believe that they had been destroyed, and would kill us for refusing to surrender them. And I would sooner die a beggar than have your fortune fall into the hands of this Mongol!”

“Come! Sit by the fire and warm yourself,” said Katerin, pushing a bench toward the front of the stove, which was now crackling merrily with the wood. “We are safe enough here till the Americans come.”

“Oh, the Americans will never come,” said Michael, as he settled himself before the fire and held out his hands to the heat. “We must use our wits and get away from Chita—to Harbin or Vladivostok. Others have done it. We might send Wassili to Harbin for help.”

“That would do no good. Our friends cannot come back here to help us. If they did, they could not fight Zorogoff’s army. We must keep up good hope for whatever the future holds for us, and——”

There came a hammering at the outer gate of the courtyard. Katerin checked her words and stood immovable, her eyes on her father in sudden fear of what the summons below might mean. The noise outside stopped as abruptly as it had begun, and then was resumed—insistent, compelling, ruthless. It sounded like the thumping of rifle butts against the planks of the gate. Whoever it was that demanded admittance was not to be denied. There was in the noise a peremptoriness which indicated that if there