WHISHAW FREDERICK

BORIS THE BEAR-HUNTER

Frederick Whishaw

Boris the Bear-Hunter

Whishaw F.

Boris the Bear-Hunter / F. Whishaw — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

Frederick Whishaw
Boris the Bear-Hunter

CHAPTER I.
THE HUNTER HUNTED

The moment at which I propose to introduce my readers to Boris the Bear-Hunter came very near, as it happened, to being the last which my hero was destined to spend upon this earth. Great hunter as Boris was, there is no doubt about it that on this particular occasion he met his match, and came within measurable distance of defeat at the hands—or rather paws—of one of the very creatures whose overthrow was at once his profession and his glory.

It happened many a year ago—about two hundred, in fact; and the scene of Boris's adventure was an exceedingly remote one, far away in the north of Europe, close to Archangel.

Boris Ivanitch was a peasant whose home was an outlying village near the large town just mentioned. He was a serf, of course, as were all his fellows at that time; but in consequence of his wonderful strength and courage, and of his aptitude for pursuing and killing every kind of wild beast and game, he was exempt, by favour of his lord, both from taxation and from the manual labour which the owner of the soil could have exacted from him. In a word, Boris was employed to keep the country clear, or as clear as possible, of bears and wolves, which, when left to themselves, were at that time the cause of much danger and loss to the inhabitants of that portion of the Russian empire.

Boris performed his duties well. There was no man, young or old, for hundreds of miles around who could compare with this young giant in any of those sports or competitions in which the palm went to the strongest. Tall and muscular beyond his years—for he was but nineteen at this time—lithe as a willow, straight as a poplar, Boris excelled in anything which called into play the qualities of activity and strength. Had he lived in our day and attended an English public school, he would undoubtedly have come to the front, whether on the cricket or the football field, on the running path or on the river. But being debarred from the privileges of English schoolboys, Boris was obliged to expend his energies in those exercises which were open to him, and which alone were familiar to the people of his country—snow-shoeing, hunting, swimming, and similar sports natural to the livers of a wild, outdoor life in a scarcely civilized land.

It was early summer-time, and the woods, or rather forests, about Archangel were in their fullest heyday of life and beauty. Hundreds of square miles of pine trees were the principal feature of the landscape, dotted here and there by a patch of cultivated land, or watched over by a tumble-down village nestling beneath the shadow of the forest. Oats and wheat, now fast ripening, waved in the soft air of June, and told of peace and plenty for those who took the trouble to till the generous soil for a living. The prospects of the crops around Dubinka, Boris's village, appeared at first sight to be promising enough—the rye was tall and nearly ripe, and the oats were doing capitally; but had you asked the peasants, the owners of the crops, they would have told you, with the lamentations common to the Russian peasant, that God had certainly been very good to them and sent them a fine harvest, but that the devil had spoiled all the good work by sending two large bears to eat up and trample down the fruits of the field, and to ruin the poor peasants. Ivan's field was half eaten up already, they would have said, and Andrey's would go next. And Boris couldn't find the bears, or he would soon give them "something in their stomachs better for them than the peasants' oats;" but there was no snow, and Boris could not track them without it, though he had been after the brutes for a fortnight and more.

This was all true enough—indeed, Boris was "after them" at the present moment, though to look at him you would scarcely have thought it; for the hunter was busily engaged strolling lazily

through the forest, picking and enjoying the beautiful wild strawberries which covered the ground in profusion. He had propped his bear-spear against a tree, and was at the moment some distance from the weapon—tempted away from it against his usual habit by the peculiar lusciousness of the fruit, which was warm from the sun, and very delicious.

Even strawberry eating palls at length upon the satiated palate, and Boris began to think that he had had enough. He would now resume, he thought, his search for those marauding bears who had broken into the village corn-fields and destroyed the peace of the poor peasants. So he picked one more handful of the strawberries, crammed them into his mouth, sighed, glanced regretfully at the delicious fruit at his feet, and finally raised his head to look for his bear-spear. As he did so, he became aware of a huge form standing close at hand, some ten yards away, showing its teeth, and quietly watching his movements. It was a bear!

Boris's first feeling was one of great joy at meeting his enemy at last; his second was one of dismay as he realized the want of his trusty spear.

It must not for a moment be supposed that Boris was alarmed by the situation. If any one had told him that he was in a situation of peril, he would have laughed aloud at the very idea of such a thing. His regret was caused solely by the fear that, being unarmed, he might lose the opportunity of doing business with that bear upon this particular occasion, and would probably have to find him again before settling accounts.

Hoping to catch sight of his spear, and to reach it before the bear could make off, Boris backed slowly towards the place where he thought he had left the weapon. Bruin did not, as he had expected, give a loud roar to show his enemy that he was an awful fellow if he liked, and then straightway turn and run. On the contrary, the brute advanced towards the hunter, growling and showing certain very large and business-like teeth. Then Boris felt that it would be well to find that spear of his as quickly as possible, for he had no other weapon about him, and the bear appeared to be very much in earnest. So the hunter turned and ran, with the bear at his heels.

At first Boris rather enjoyed the chase. It would be an amusing story to tell at the village when he arrived there with the bear's skin. How the peasants would all laugh, and how they would sing and make merry in the evening over the downfall of their enemy! Boris could afford to tell a good story about himself and a bear, even though the laugh had been on the bear's side to begin with, if he produced the skin of the bear at the same time.

Yes, *if*. But the growling of the brute sounded rather close at his ear, and Boris was forced to dodge in and out between the tree trunks in order to avoid capture.

As the moments passed, and he grew more and more out of breath, Boris longed eagerly for the welcome sight of his bear-spear. Once or twice the bear had so nearly collared him that he bethought him that he must devise some plan by which to gain a little breath. A roar and a rush from behind at this moment, together with the loss of a considerable portion of the tail of his shirt, which, being worn outside the trousers, Russian fashion, had fluttered in the breeze, made it plain that there was no time to be lost. He must take to a tree and gain time. So Boris pulled himself together, put on a mighty spurt, and was five feet up the stem of a pine tree just as Bruin reached the foot of it, and rose on his hind legs to follow him aloft.

Up went Boris and up went Bruin, both fine climbers, and both scrambling and puffing as though their very lives depended upon their agility, as indeed was the case so far as concerned one at least of them. Quick as he was, Boris was nearly caught. He had barely time to climb along a branch and let himself fall to the earth, when the bear was already upon the same bough and looking down after him, meditating as to whether he too should drop to the ground or adopt the slower and safer course of climbing down again by the trunk, as he had come up. Luckily for Boris the discretion of that bear prevailed over his desire to save time, and he decided upon the slower method of descent. This decision gave Boris a moment or two of breathing time, which he sadly required.

He sat down to rest, and looked around frantically in every direction in hopes of catching sight of his spear. That action nearly cost him his life. The bear, impatient as bears are when irritated, could not tolerate the slow process of descending which it had chosen, and when half-way down the stem of the pine had dropped the rest of the way in order to gain time. Boris was barely able to rise and slip away when the heavy brute dropped upon the very spot where he had been sitting. Away went Boris, slightly refreshed, and with his "second wind" coming on, and after him flew Bruin, furious and determined. Again Boris dodged and ran, and ran and dodged, and again he felt the hot breath and heard the loud pants and growls at his ear; again his breath began to fail him, and his heart as well, when, just as he was nearly spent, his eye fell upon that which was to him at that moment the fairest sight that ever his eye beheld—his beloved spear leaning against a tree-trunk one hundred yards away.

CHAPTER II.
BORIS FINDS A NEW FRIEND

Boris was so exhausted with the long chase that he had hardly sufficient strength to reach the weapon and turn it against his furious pursuer. To do this he must gain ground upon the bear, which was at the instant so close behind that he could have kicked it with his heel. Summoning therefore all the energy of which he was still master, the hunted hunter filled his lungs to the full, and started to run the fastest hundred yards that he had ever covered. So swiftly did he fly over the ground that he was some twenty-five good paces in front of the bear when his hands closed upon his faithful spear, and he knew that, for the moment at least, he was saved, and that if only his strength did not fail him he should now hold his own and perhaps a little more when Bruin came to close quarters.

Twisting round with the rapidity of a spindle, Boris felt for a steady foothold for both of his feet, found it, poised his long steel-tipped wooden spear, took a long, deep breath, set his teeth, and in a moment the struggle had commenced. The bear, slightly rising on his hind legs to seize and hug his foe, threw himself with a loud roar of rage upon Boris, impaling himself as he did so upon the cruel point of the spear. This was a critical moment. Strong as he was, and firmly as he had taken his stand, the shock of the huge brute's rush all but knocked poor weary Boris off his legs and nearly tore his muscular arms from their sockets. The bear, mad with pain and rage, pressed in its fury upon the stout spear, and bit and tore at the good oak until the splinters flew and the whole spear shook and trembled in the hunter's grasp.

Breathless and weary as he was, Boris nevertheless held his own, and for some time budged not an inch.

There is a limit, however, to the powers of the hardest muscles and of the stoutest hearts, and the present tension was more than the bravest and the strongest could support for any length of time. Boris was evidently tiring. Had he been fresh when this great wrestling match began, he would long since have made an irresistible rush, pushed the monster over backwards, and despatched him with repeated digs of the spear, as he had many a time treated bears before. But Boris was weary with his long struggle. He could not hold on much longer, but in desperation he still clung to his quivering spear, and pushed with all his might and determination against his giant enemy.

And now his head began to swim, and his eyes grew hot and dimmed, and there was a sound in his ears as of waters that rushed in and overwhelmed him. Still his senses did not desert him, nor his nerve. As he became conscious that his strength was failing him he became the more determined to hold out, and with a hoarse shout of defiance he pulled himself together for one supreme effort. His failing grasp clutched tighter at the shaft; his stiff and aching feet planted themselves yet more firmly in their grip of the foothold from which they had not budged by a hair's-breadth; his tightened muscles tightened themselves yet more as he bore upon the shaft, and forced it by sheer strength of will a couple of inches further towards victory. The bear tottered, his eyes rolled and his tongue showed between his teeth, and for a moment it seemed that Boris had won the battle. Now it is anybody's game! For an instant and another neither bear nor man has the advantage. Then the bear rallies. Growling, sputtering, roaring, the monster slowly recovers his lost ground, then gains an inch, and another. Boris feels faint and dizzy; his strength is failing, his grasp relaxing. Still he fights on; but it is useless now. His brave feet, that have held their own so long, give way; his muscles too, they have made a good fight, but they cannot hold out longer—they are relaxing; his fingers are loosening their hold upon the shaft; his eyes are so dim now that they cannot see the monster who is falling upon him to slay him; he is vanquished, he is giving ground rapidly; in another instant he will fall, and die. The bear will die too, of course; that thought will be his dying consolation.

A shout of encouragement behind him, and the sound of rushing feet! "Hold tight there just one minute more!" somebody cries; and automatically the stiffened fingers tighten themselves, and the feet grip the ground. Then a fresh hand grasps the shaft; two powerful feet plant themselves in the place where the failing ones have stood; and as the wearied and vanquished Boris falls fainting to the earth, the new arrival bears upon that stout staff with a force which even the mighty bear cannot withstand.

Back goes the bear by inches—now he is tottering—another shout and an irresistible rush forwards, and he is down, fighting and tearing to the last as a bold king of the forest should.

One more dig into the dying monster, a kick upon the prostrate carcass with the long, heavy Russian boot, and then the stranger turns to look after poor Boris. But first he wipes his hands upon a tuft of purple-fruited bilberry leaves, and from an inner pocket of his somewhat rich-looking *kaftan*, or tunic, he produces a silver-tipped flagon of Russian spirits. This he puts to the lips of Boris, who soon revives under the treatment, and sits up, dazed, to stare around with his hand to his eyes. First he fixes a long look upon the prostrate bear and the spear lying beside it; then he catches sight of the stranger, and stares long and fixedly at him. At last he says, "Are you St. Boris come to save me in answer to my call?"

The stranger burst into a loud, jovial guffaw.

"Bless your heart," he shouted, "I'm not a saint! Very far from it, I'm afraid. I'm only a man, like yourself."

"A man indeed!" said Boris; "and such a man as I have not seen the likeness of—well, since I last looked in the looking-glass!"

Boris made this remark in perfectly good faith, and without the slightest intention of paying himself a compliment. He knew well enough that he was by many degrees the strongest and finest-looking man in the country side, and by comparing the stranger with himself he merely offered honest testimony to the magnificent appearance of the latter. Nor was his admiration misplaced, for a finer-looking young fellow than he who now bent over Boris was rarely seen. Scarcely more than a boy—he was about the same age as Boris himself—the stranger was tall and robust, and straight as a young pine; taller than Boris, and broader too, though not more athletic-looking. His face was handsome and powerful, and his black hair curled in masses over a wide forehead and bold, rather cruel eyes. Boris gazed in admiration at this magnificent specimen of humanity—it was a new sensation to him to see any one physically superior to himself.

"You made a good fight," said the stranger, guffawing once more over the last speech of Boris; "but though you seem to have a fairly good opinion of yourself, that bear would have been lying on the top of you by this time if I had not come up in the nick of time. I watched the fight for some minutes. You have pluck, I am pleased to observe. What is your name?"

"Boris the Bear-Hunter," replied that worthy.

"Ha, ha! Boris the Bear-*Hunted*, you mean," laughed the stranger. "Well, I should like to know more of you, if you will. Come and see me to-morrow morning at Archangel, and we'll have a chat."

"Very well, *barin*" (gentleman), said Boris, feeling, in spite of his own usually defiant independence of spirit, that here was one who must of necessity command and be obeyed; "for I see you are a barin by your kaftan. What are you called, and where shall I seek you?"

"Petka, and sometimes Petrushka, is my name," said the big youth; "and you may ask for me at the burgomaster's house in the town. You will hear of me there till eleven to-morrow; after that I take ship for a sail abroad. And now I will leave you and *mishka*[1] yonder to take care of one another. Beware, while you skin him, that he doesn't jump up and skin *you*. He may be shamming while I am here, you see; but he has no cause to be afraid of you."

[1] *Mishka* is the familiar Russian name for a bear.

With which gentle sarcasm and another jovial laugh the tall youth departed, leaving Boris to reflect upon the extreme good fortune which had sent him the right man at the right moment to extract him from the tightest fix he had ever succeeded in getting himself into during the whole course of his nineteen summers.

CHAPTER III.
BORIS CHANGES MASTERS

Boris, when he returned to the village that same afternoon, enjoyed a veritable triumph at the hands of his delighted fellows. He was honest enough to confess his indebtedness to the stranger, but this did not make the slightest difference in the gratitude of the peasants; and indeed the service which Boris had rendered them, in thus ridding them of an infliction worse than the most terrible blight, was no slight one. A large bear, when so disposed, and when allowed to work his wicked will upon the corn-fields of a village, will very speedily either consume or trample into hay the entire grain wealth of the community; so that the gratitude of the peasants was proportionate to their clear gain in the death of one of the two monster pests which had come, like a scourge upon the village, to devour the fatness thereof.

Boris was carried shoulder-high through the one street of the place; while the carcass of the dead robber, slung by his four legs to a pole, was borne behind, escorted by a booing, yelling crowd of women and children. A bonfire was lighted at night in honour of the hunter and his achievement, when portions of the bear were cooked and eaten, more as an expression of contempt for the late owner of the flesh than for love of the food. Most of the carcass was given to the dogs, however, and they, at least, were delighted with the feast.

Boris was well feasted with *vodka* and with other delicacies equally bad for him; but being a sensible youth and steady withal, he did not retire at night in the degraded condition of most of his fellow-villagers. He was elated, no doubt, not by the fumes of the spirits, however, but by the sense of triumph; yet the more he pondered over his fight and victory, the more clearly did he realize his indebtedness to the timely aid of the strong young giant who had come to his assistance. As he lay and dozed, half conscious, through the hot hours of the summer night, Boris weaved the adventure of the day into a thousand fantastic shapes, in all of which, however, the stranger played an important part: sometimes he was his own patron saint; then he was a benevolent *lieshui*, or wood-spirit, a class of beings fully believed in by the peasants, but, according to popular tradition, more likely to take the part of the bear than of Boris in a fight between the two. In a word, the stranger assumed so many various shapes in the hunter's overwrought brain at night, that when day came Boris was by no means certain whether the stranger had in reality existed at all, and was inclined to fancy that the whole thing had been a dream as he lay and slept after the death of the bear, which he had slain single-handed.

Half hoping that this might prove to be the case—for the idea that he had almost been worsted by a bear, however huge, was an unwelcome thought to so renowned a hunter—Boris determined, nevertheless, that he would at least journey as far as the town, which was but a mile or two distant, in order to learn for himself whether there indeed existed a young giant of the name of Petka.

Boris set out at the appointed hour for Archangel and the house of the burgomaster. The house was easily found, for it was the principal building of the place, and was so grand, indeed, to look upon that Boris scarcely liked his mission. What if the whole thing should have been a dream? Why, what a fool he would appear, coming to this grand place and inquiring for some one who did not exist; all these serfs and dressed-up people about the front door would laugh at him, and tell him to go home and drink less vodka the next time he killed a bear. However, Boris reflected, if any one should laugh at him, laughers were easily knocked down. He was as good a man, and perhaps a trifle better, than any of these embroidered chaps. Let them laugh if they liked; their mirth might cost them a little of their embroidery! So Boris pulled himself together, and marched up to the porch of the big wooden structure which had been pointed out to him as the house of the burgomaster. A stately doorkeeper, dressed, in spite of the warmth of the season, in a gold-laced kaftan and a high fur cap, listened to the young peasant's inquiry with some bewilderment. Was there any one living there of the name of

Petka? Boris had asked,—a young fellow about his own age? Boris believed he was a barin, but could not be sure; he gave this address.

"Petka?" repeated the astonished porter. "What do you mean? Petka who? What's his family name?"

"I only know he called himself Petka; he said sometimes he was known as Petrushka," said Boris, beginning to feel assured that he was the victim of a dream. "He was a tall, well-set-up sort of a fellow," he continued, "as big as I am, or bigger. Come now; is he here, or is he not? I warn you I am not a man to annoy; I am Boris the Bear-Hunter."

It was not meant as an idle boast. Had the doorkeeper been a native of the town he would have known well enough who the bearer of this name was; but it so happened that this man was a new arrival from Moscow, whence he had come with the retinue of his master the Tsar, and therefore the title meant nothing to him, but savoured only of boasting and the conceit of local celebrity.

"Well," he said, "you can go home again and hunt your bears at leisure; there's no Petka, nor yet Petrushka, here. As for annoying you, I know nothing about that, but you are going the right way to get yourself a taste of the knout, my friend; and if you don't clear out of this street in double quick time, I shall summon those who are very well able to make you cry, though you may be the best bear-sticker that ever walked. Now then, off you go!"

The fellow laid his hand upon the hunter's arm, as though to put his threat of violence into execution; but in doing so he made a great mistake. Boris was fearless and independent; he was unaccustomed to threats and interference. As a rule people were afraid of him, and showed him deference: what right had this man to browbeat and threaten him? Boris's hot blood resented the insult, and in a moment the man lay sprawling at his feet, bellowing loudly for help, crying and swearing in a breath, in a manner which is natural to the Russian peasant. His cries instantly brought around the pair a host of serfs and servants, who quickly hustled Boris within the passage, and made as though they would lay hold of him. But this the high-spirited hunter of bears would not submit to, and, with his back to the wall, he hit out right and left with so good effect that the number of his assailants was considerably reduced in very quick time indeed.

This was a row quite after Boris's own heart, and he was thoroughly enjoying himself among the noisy crowd of shouting and whining serving-men, when a loud voice broke in above the noise —a voice that Boris seemed to recognize, and at the sound of which every other voice in that noisy hall died away into instant silence. The fallen assailants of Boris uprose from the earth and ranged themselves in line, prepared to denounce the foe or to excuse themselves according as occasion arose. But the new arrival exacted no explanations.

"Why," he cried, "it's my friend the bear-eater! Come along this way, Bear-eater, and tell me all about this disturbance. Have you killed so few bears of late that you must needs work off your spare energies at the expense of my poor servants? Well, well, if you were to rid me of a score or two of the thieving rogues, I should do well enough without them, I daresay. But what is it all about?"

"The man with the embroidery wanted to give me the knout because I asked for you by the name of Petka," said Boris, feeling that there was more in all this than he had quite understood. This must be something like a barin, who could talk in so airy a way of a "score or two" of his servants. "You said your name was Petka, didn't you?"

"Assuredly," said the other, leading the way into a private chamber; "Petka or Petrushka, sometimes Peter—I answer to all these names. But come now, to business. I like the look of you, Boris. I want Russians with strong bodies and brave hearts; I shall have work for them. Do you feel inclined to enter my service? I will pay you well if you serve me well. Now, then, no wasting words, for I am due down at the harbour—is it yes or no?"

"But I am not my own master," said the astonished Boris. "I am the property of my barin, who employs me to hunt the bears and wolves. I cannot say I will leave him and serve you, though I like the look of you well enough. Besides, what do you want me for—to kill bears?"

"You shall hunt the bears to your heart's content," said the barin; "and as for your master, I will see that he does not object to your transfer to my service. Is it agreed? come, yes or no."

"Yes, then," said Boris, who both spoke and acted as in a dream. The mastery of this young giant over him seemed so complete that he could not have answered otherwise than in the affirmative even if he had wished to do so. He was drawn by a power stronger than himself.

"Very well," said the other, writing rapidly, "excellently well; shake hands upon it. Take this to your master, and come to this place to enter upon your service to-morrow morning. You may ask for Piotr [Peter] Alexeyevitch, and I shall be ready to receive you. Now I must go sailing with Meinheer de Kuyper. Stay; your hand-grip now. Good! that's more like a grip than any I have felt for some time. I shall like you, I think; only serve me faithfully."

Peter Alexeyevitch, as he had called himself, left the room with these words. But Boris preserved somewhat painful reminiscences of his new friend and master for several hours, for the return hand-grip had been such that the bones of his hand had ground together in the mighty clasp.

CHAPTER IV.
BORIS GOES A-SAILING

It was all very well for Boris to tell his new friend that he would enter his service; but when, away from the glamour of his presence, he considered the matter in cold blood, it appeared to him to be a somewhat audacious proceeding on his part to coolly bring to his master a note from some one else, whom he could only describe as a tall and masterful young barin of the name of Peter Alexeyevitch, stating that somebody proposed to deprive his lawful lord of the services of his paid serf and servant, the bear-hunter! Why, after all, should his lord consent to so audacious a proposal from a total stranger? There was no reason that Boris knew why he should do so; in all probability he would refuse, and perhaps punish Boris besides for his impertinence and disloyalty in proposing such a thing, or at least being a consenting party to such a proposal. Hence Boris entered the barin's house at Dubinka in some trepidation, and gave his letter into the master's own hands, quite expecting an angry reception.

"Well, Boris, so you killed one of the two bears, I'm told," began the barin. "You've come for your 'tea-money,' I suppose? Well, you have deserved it this time, and I shall pay it with pleasure. What's this?—a letter? from whom?"

"That's what I can't tell your Mercifulness," said Boris. "Petka, he calls himself, but I don't know who he is, excepting that he is a gentleman like yourself, and very big and strong—like me."

The barin took the letter and glanced at it; then he flushed, and uttered an exclamation of surprise. Then he laughed, and patted Boris kindly on the back.

"Bravo, Boris!" he said, "you have made a useful friend. Do you know whom this letter is from?"

"From Petka, of course!" said blunt Boris.

"Your friend is the Tsar of all the Russias, my son; and, moreover, he has requested me to transfer you to his service. You are a lucky boy, Boris, and I hope you may do your new master credit. Serve him well. He is Peter, the Hope of the Nation; all Russia looks to him, for he promises much. You are a lucky fellow, Boris, and you may be a great man yet."

Astonishment and wonder had caused the bear-hunter to collapse into a chair, a liberty he would never have thought of taking except under extraordinary circumstances. The Tsar! it was actually the Tsar himself who had stepped forward to save his humble life. Boris pinched his leg to see whether he was awake or asleep: it was all right, he was not dreaming. And he had called him "Petka," and the Tsar had not promptly cut off his head for the impertinence! Perhaps he would to-morrow when he went to the burgomaster's house in the morning. And those were the Tsar's servants with whose whining forms he had carpeted the floor of the entrance hall! Assuredly he would pay for all this with his head.

In a dazed condition Boris left the barin's presence, and walked home to his father's cottage, wondering whether it would not be wiser, on the whole, to disappear into the depths of the forest until such time as the Tsar should have left Archangel and returned to Moscow? But worthier thoughts quickly succeeded these promptings of cowardice. Boris recalled the Tsar's kind words—he had taken a fancy to the bear-hunter, he said; and again, "Russia had need of strong arms and brave hearts!" If this was so, and he could please the magnificent young Tsar by doing it, he should unreservedly place his life and his service at Peter's disposal.

The next morning found Boris once again at the house of the burgomaster. This time the embroidered functionary in charge of the front entrance, mindful of his experience of the preceding day, was careful to keep his conversation void of offence, and to preserve a respectful demeanour to the owner of two such powerful fists. Acting perhaps on orders received, he ushered the young bear-hunter directly into the presence of his new master.

Peter sat at a table, busily employed in manipulating a model sailing-vessel, explaining the uses of the various sails and other portions of the ship's furniture to a stolidly attentive companion, who sat and listened and smoked, and occasionally bowed his head in assent to the propositions laid down by his handsome young companion. There could not well be a greater contrast between any two men than existed between these two—the one, a short, thick-set, squat-figured, Dutch-built caricature of a man; the other, tall, far beyond the ordinary height of man, straight as any one of all the millions of pines that stood sentinel over his vast dominions, noble and majestic, the very incarnate spirit of majesty.

Peter paused in his lesson to greet the new-comer.

"De Kuyper," he said, "look here! This is a fellow who calls himself a bear-hunter, and I saw him the other day running away from a bear for dear life, like a hare from a hound—it was grand! If I had not interfered, the bear would have deprived me of the services of an excellent soldier, or sailor, or keeper, or whatever I may decide to make of him—eh, Boris?"

"I will serve your Majesty with my life blood in whatever manner you may be pleased to use me," said Boris, kneeling before the young Tsar and touching the ground with his forehead; "and I entreat you to forgive my ignorance yesterday, and my impertinence in treating you as little better than my equal–"

"Nonsense," said Peter; "get up. I hate cringing and all foolery. You shall show me what you are good for; I shall see that you have ample opportunity. Meanwhile let's have no talk about equality or inferiority. You will find that they who serve me well are my equals in all but the name. For the present you are my special body-servant, to attend me wherever I go. And first you shall attend me on board De Kuyper's ship, and we shall see what prospect there is of making a sailor of you.—Come on, De Kuyper, the wind is getting up. We shall have a glorious sail.—Come on you too, Boris."

De Kuyper was the fortunate skipper of the first foreign vessel which had entered the port of Archangel during the present season, after the disappearance of the ice had left the harbour open to arrivals from abroad. Peter had instantly boarded the *Drei Gebrüder* on its appearance, and having himself purchased the cargo, and handsomely rewarded the skipper and crew for their enterprise, carried away De Kuyper to be his guest and favourite companion until his departure from Archangel. Under the Dutch skipper's guidance, Peter was laying the foundations of that nautical experience which was so often to stand him in good stead in after life.

Boris was no sailor—indeed, he had never been fifty yards from the shore upon shipboard, though he had ventured very much further in swimming. His sensations, therefore, as the lumbering old vessel plunged through the waves, were the reverse of enviable. Peter himself handled the rudder, and gave all the necessary orders for managing the sails, insisting upon Boris doing his share of the work in spite of the misery of sea-sickness which sat heavily upon the poor landsman.

It was a splendid day—hot on shore, but delightfully cool and pleasant out at sea. The wind blew freshly from the north and east, and Peter crowded on all the sail he could. The clumsy old vessel, squat-built and broad in the beam like her master, strained and groaned beneath the weight of canvas, but sped along at a rate which filled the young Tsar's soul with the wildest delight. As usual, when particularly happy, he was boisterous and very noisy, poking fun at De Kuyper, Boris, and the sailors, and from time to time singing snatches of his favourite songs.

It so happened that a small boat which was attached by a short length of tow-rope to the stern of the *Drei Gebrüder* presently broke adrift, in consequence of the strain, and floated away astern. The young Tsar was annoyed. He loved a good boat, and disliked to see one needlessly lost before his eyes.

"De Kuyper," he shouted, "have you a swimmer on board? Send one of your Dutchmen after it! Come, look sharp about it! They're not afraid surely? Why, I'll go myself; see here!"

Before the horrified skipper could prevent him, the rash young Tsar had thrown away his kaftan and boots, and was in the act of mounting the bulwark, when a strong hand seized his shoulder and pulled him back. The Tsar flushed with anger, and raised his big right hand to strike the man who

had presumed to take so great a liberty; but Boris pushed back the lifted arm with a sweep of his own, leaped upon a hen-coop near at hand, so to the bulwark of the vessel, and in an instant was overboard, battling with the waves, and making good progress towards the fast-disappearing boat, now far astern. The Tsar's face was all beaming with delight in a moment.

"De Kuyper!" he cried, "look at the lad—a Russian lad, mind you, skipper; none of your Dutchmen! Would your Dutchmen swim those waves? I think not. I tell you, skipper, that bear-hunter is a man after my own heart. Did you observe him push me aside—glorious!—as though I had been the cabin-boy? Oh, for ten thousand such Russians!"

De Kuyper grunted and took the rudder, which Peter in his excitement had neglected.

"Your bear-hunter had better look sharp and get into that boat," he muttered, "for the sky looks squally, and we shall have a knock-about before we reach Archangel. The sooner we get him and the boat aboard the better I shall be pleased!"

Boris meanwhile was fast gaining upon the lost boat. Soon he had reached it and was hauling himself over the side. The oars were safe, so that he had little difficulty in propelling the small craft towards the larger vessel, which had put about, and was now coming round as quickly as possible, in order to take up the recovered boat and its occupant.

With some considerable difficulty, owing to the roughness of the sea, this was at last effected; and Boris felt that he was amply repaid for the risk he had run by the few words of the Tsar, and his mighty grip of the hand.

"Bear-eater," he had said, "you are my brother; let that be understood between us."

After this episode neither sea-sickness nor the discomfort of sitting in wet clothes could divert the mind of Boris from the thought of his exceeding great joy. He had been called "brother" by the young Tsar—the god-like Peter, who had been hailed almost from his cradle as the hope of Russia; of whom even the unlettered Boris in far-off Archangel had heard distant and indistinct rumours, as of some prince of fairyland, come from no one knew where, to work wonders for his empire, and astonish the world by his power and magnificence! Now he had seen this wonder of the age with his own eyes—he had spoken with him—was his servant—had received his approbation, nay, had been called "brother" by him.

Boris, musing thus on his great good fortune, suddenly became aware of a commotion on board. A squall had violently struck the vessel, and she was heeling over till her rail lay deep in the surging sea, and her deck sloped like the side of one of his beloved snow-hills. Peter, at the helm, was shouting orders to the seamen, with his eyes fixed upon the sails, while the vessel plunged and lay over till the seas washed her fore and aft.

De Kuyper rushed to the rudder.

"Steady her—steady, Tsar!" he shouted, "or we shall founder in a minute!"

Peter, wanting experience and unused to squalls and emergencies, was thinking only of the splendid excitement of rushing through the big waves as fast as the ship could be made to go; the danger of the moment was nothing to him. Perhaps he did not realize it; he certainly did not heed it.

"Steady her, I tell you!" shrieked the skipper once more. "Here; let me come! I won't go to the bottom for a hundred Russian kings. Let go, I say!"

Peter's face flushed angrily.

"Keep away, De Kuyper, keep away," he cried; "don't anger me. This is glorious!"

But De Kuyper knew that this was no time for the politeness of courts and the deference due to princes. He seized Peter by the shoulders and forced him from the tiller.

"I'm skipper of this vessel," he shouted, "and I intend to be obeyed while aboard of her. You shall command when we get ashore, if we ever do!"

Peter let go his hold of the clumsy tiller-shaft, looking for a moment like a thunder-cloud. During that moment he revolved in his mind whether or not he should take up that squat little Dutch skipper in his great arms and throw him overboard; but better impulses prevailed. The vessel quickly

righted under De Kuyper's experienced guidance, and flew through the water actually quicker than before, and upon a more even keel. In a moment Peter had recovered his equanimity. He burst into a roar of laughter, and brought his big hand with a whack upon the little Dutchman's shoulder.

"Skipper," he cried, in his hearty loud tones of approval, "forgive me! You are a better sailor than I am, and a plucky fellow to boot. I love a man who stands up to me. You Dutchmen are a fine race, and good sailors."

De Kuyper, the excitement over and the danger past, was much upset by the recollection of his rudeness to one who, though his inferior in the art of sailing, was so immeasurably his superior in position and importance. He apologized profusely and humbly, and on his knees begged to be forgiven.

"Get up," said Peter, "and don't be a fool, skipper. I liked you far better when you forced me away from the tiller. I was a fool, and you told me so; that is what I like in a man."

CHAPTER V.
HOW PETER THE GREAT WAS KNOCKED OVER

Before Boris had been very long in the service of the Tsar he had become quite an expert sailor; indeed, he and his young master were scarcely ever absent from shipboard of one kind or another. Archangel was at this time Russia's one outlet to the sea. St. Petersburg was not yet built, nor Cronstadt thought of; the Baltic ports had still to be wrested from their proprietors; only the little northern port at the mouth of the Dwina was open to receive the ships and commerce of the world. Consequently, as the season proceeded, vessels of all nationalities, including English, appeared with their merchandise at this distant market; and Peter passed many weeks in the most congenial occupation of studying each vessel that entered the port, sailing about in them, making friends with their captains, and learning everything he could gather of the history and circumstances of the people to which each belonged. Boris, too, learned many marvels concerning this planet of ours and its inhabitants, undreamed of hitherto. The young hunter was constantly in attendance on Peter—waited upon him at dinner, slept at his door at night, sailed with him, walked abroad with him, and was, in a word, his inseparable companion.

The villagers at Dubinka greatly deplored the departure of Boris from among them; for what were they going to do without him when the winter-time came round, and the wolves began to be both numerous and assertive? Who was to keep them in check now that the great Boris was gone? Even now they had the best of reasons for acutely deploring the hunter's absence. It will be remembered that whereas there had been two bears engaged in the plundering of the peasants' corn-fields, only one of these had been accounted for by Boris before his departure. The second bear had disappeared for some little time after the death of its liege lord; but the days of her mourning being now accomplished, she had reappeared, and with appetite largely improved by her period of abstinence. Her depredations became so serious at last that it was resolved by the council of the peasants to send into the town a request to Boris to devote his earliest leisure to a personal interview with the widow of his late antagonist.

Boris received the message of the good folks of Dubinka with delight. The very mention of a bear aroused all his old sporting instincts, and he went straight to the Tsar to obtain his permission to absent himself for a day.

"Ho, ho!" laughed Peter. "So you want to be eaten up again, do you? I doubt whether I can spare you; you have made yourself too useful to me. Had you not better stay? It is safer here."

Boris blushed. "The bear isn't born yet, sire," he said, "that will make me run again. The bear you killed had caught me napping. I shall never leave my spear again, to eat strawberries."

"Well, well," said Peter, "you shall go on one condition—that I go with you to see you safely through with the adventure."

And so it came about that Boris and his master walked out very early one summer morning to relieve the peasants of Dubinka of their unwelcome visitor. The two young giants called first at the house of the *starost*, or principal peasant of the place, whom they aroused from his slumbers and carried off with them into the fields at the edge of the forest, to show them the exact spot at which the robber had concluded her supper on the previous evening; for it was probable that she would recommence her plundering at or about the same spot. The starost brought the hunters to the place they sought, approaching it in abject terror, and scudding home again like a hare, lest the bear should pursue him back over the fields.

Boris was the Tsar's master in their present occupation, and thoroughly understood what he was about. The pair concealed themselves in a dense clump of cover at the edge of the wood. Just in front of their ambush lay the oat-field last honoured by the attentions of the bear. A large portion

of it looked as though a battle had been fought on it, so downtrodden and crushed were the tall, delicate stalks. It was arranged that Peter should hold the spear, while Boris was to be content with the hunting-knife, one which the Tsar had brought with him, a long and business-like blade, both tough and sharp, as a blade needs to be to be driven through the thick hide of a bear. The young monarch was anxious to try his "'prentice hand" with the spear, for he had never handled one excepting on that memorable occasion when he gave the final push to the huge brute which had first winded and then overpowered poor Boris. The hunter very carefully explained the exact way in which Peter must poise his body, how he must grip the spear-shaft, and how he must plant his feet so as to balance his body conveniently and at the same time obtain a purchase with his heel which should enable him to support any, even the greatest, strain. Then the two men waited in silence for the arrival of the widow of the late lamented Mr. Bruin.

It was still very early, about four o'clock. There was no sound to break the repose of the young day, save the boisterous song which now and again some little bird set up for a moment, and as suddenly broke off, finding itself to be the only singer. The pines swayed solemnly in the faint morning breeze, sending down showers of bright dewdrops far and wide. A hare was playing quietly in the oat-field, quite unconscious of the presence of its natural enemy, man; and presently a proudly-clucking grouse walked out with her brood into the oat-strown space beyond the wood, and there demonstrated to her young hopefuls how easily a breakfast could be picked up by people who knew where to look for it. In the far distance a family of cranes could be heard at intervals, exchanging confidences upon the adventures of the past night and the delights of a hearty breakfast of frog.

Suddenly, and without apparent reason, the hare raised its head, sniffed the air, and in a moment was scuttling full speed across the field, heading for the village, as though it had remembered a message for the starost which it had omitted to deliver while he was on the spot. The careful grouse at the same moment rose from the earth with a loud cluck, and darted away, followed by her little brood. Over the tops of the pines they went, far away into the heart of the forest.

In another moment the reason for this abrupt departure of bird and beast became apparent. Shuffling awkwardly along, and mumbling in a querulous way as she went, as though complaining that she had been called up to breakfast earlier than was necessary, came the wicked old widow-bear, marching straight for the standing oats, as though everything in the district belonged to her. She was a huge creature, a fitting helpmate for the gigantic old warrior whom Peter had slain. Slowly she picked her way along, swinging her heavy body and half-turning her great head at each step, looking alternately to right and to left in a perfunctory manner, as though making a concession to the principle of precaution, while declining to believe in the possibility of misadventure.

Boris's finger was at his lip, enjoining patience and prudence, for the impulsive young Tsar was excited, and quite capable of ruining the chances of a successful hunt by doing something rash and ill-timed. Boris touched the Tsar's arm and whispered. Peter was to creep cautiously along and place himself in the very spot at which the bear had issued from the forest. When there, he was to hold his spear ready for action and await events. Boris himself would walk out into the oat-field, in full view of the bear, who would probably not charge him. Most likely she would hurry back to the cover, entering the wood where she had left it; and if Boris could influence her course, he would encourage her to choose that particular direction. Then the Tsar must suddenly step out from his ambush and receive the bear upon his spear; and if matters went smoothly, the impetus of her flight would bring her down upon him, whether she liked it or not.

The plan of attack thus settled, Peter withdrew under cover of the bushes and pine trunks to take up the position assigned him, while Boris boldly stepped forth from his ambush, and made for a point beyond the place where the bear was now busy gobbling the grain greedily, and emitting grunts of satisfaction and high content. So well occupied was she, indeed, that she took no notice of the hunter's approach until Boris was nearly level with her. Then she raised her head with a grunt, and expressed her surprise and displeasure in a loud roar. For a moment it appeared likely that she would

charge Boris, who, having nothing but a hunting-knife wherewith to defend himself, might in that event have fared badly; for he would have died rather than turn his back upon her and run, since Peter was at hand to see. But timid counsels prevailed, and Mrs. Bruin quickly determined to take the safer course. She twisted her bulky body round, and made off, as Boris had foretold, straight for the spot at which she had left the forest. Boris ran after her, shouting, in hopes of accelerating her speed; and in this he was entirely successful. Straight down for the Tsar's ambush she raced, and close at her heels went Boris, shouting instructions to Peter as he sped. The result of all this speed and excitement was that by the time the great creature had reached the spot where Peter awaited her, the impetus of her flight was so great that she was upon him, as he stepped out to meet her, ere she had time to swerve sufficiently to avoid him.

The Tsar had stepped forth at precisely the right moment, and was ready with poised spear to receive the rush. His feet had gripped the earth as tightly as in the somewhat slippery condition of the ground was practicable. With a roar the monster hurled herself upon the spear-point, uttering a second and very bitter cry as she felt the steel enter into her vitals.

The shock of her rush was terrific. Peter, strong as he was and firmly as he had planted himself, was knocked off his feet in an instant, and ere Boris could realize the full horror of the situation, the most valuable life in all Russia lay at the mercy of an enraged and maddened she-bear. Peter fell backwards; but as the huge brute precipitated herself upon the top of him, the good spear-shaft of seasoned wood caught in the ground, and for a moment held her suspended, so that she could reach her enemy with neither teeth nor claws.

That moment saved the Tsar's life. Boris was but a few yards behind, and it was the work of an instant for him to cast himself headlong upon the carcass of the roaring, blood-stained brute, and with an accurately placed thrust of the knife in her throat put an end in the nick of time to her cravings for vengeance. With his additional weight thrown suddenly into the scale the good spear-shaft snapped in two, and bear and hunter together toppled over upon the prostrate figure of Russia's Tsar.

"Thank you, Brother Boris," said the Tsar quietly, rising from the ground and wiping the bear's blood from his clothes. "It was well done; we are quits. When you see me over-proud, my son, you shall remind me of this morning, and how an old she-bear sent me head over heels. Now let's get home to breakfast."

CHAPTER VI.
A TASTE OF THE KNOUT

Thus were laid and cemented the foundations of a friendship destined to last for many a long, history-making year. Boris was a man after Peter's own heart, and from those early Archangel days until the end of their lives the two were rarely parted for long, excepting when the exigencies of public affairs necessitated the departure of one of them for distant portions of the realm.

The summer in Archangel is a short one, and by the end of August autumn is in full progress, with icy warnings of winter at night-time. Peter the Tsar had, besides, many important duties which called for his presence at the capital, Moscow; and towards the end of July it became necessary to bring his delightful seaside holiday to an end, and return to sterner duties at home. Peter decided to travel in a three-horse *tarantass*, a springless carriage slung upon a pole instead of springs—comfortable enough on soft country roads, but desperately jolting on stony ones.

Boris had begged to be allowed to accompany his beloved patron and friend, in order that he might instruct the Tsar in the art of "calling" wolves and perhaps lynxes, and thus while away a few of the tedious hours of the long journey. Peter was delighted to acquiesce in this arrangement; for if there was one thing in the world that this most energetic of sovereigns could not tolerate, it was to sit idle with no possibility of finding food for observation for his eyes or new facts and new ideas for assimilation in his ever active and receptive brain. So the two posted on in front of the long procession of servants and luggage, comfortably housed in a covered tarantass, drawn by three horses abreast, and driven by a notable driver renowned for his skill in persuading that erratic animal, the Russian pony, to move along faster than had been its intention when it started. Ivan arrived at this happy result by a judicious mixture of coaxing and abuse, calling the ponies every pet name in the Russian vocabulary at one moment, and sounding the very depths and shoals of the language of the slums at the next. Ivan was never silent for a moment, but spoke to his ponies incessantly; and these latter generously decided as a rule that they must do their best for such an orator.

Through the tumble-down villages of northern Russia the tarantass flew, while the inhabitants stared round-eyed as it passed, not dreaming for a moment that it was their Tsar who glided by, but taking him for one of the many traders who posted between the seaport and the capital in tarantasses crammed with merchandise of every description. Peter was well armed with matchlock and pistols, for there was the possibility of a *rencontre* with wolves or robbers, and it was well to be prepared for every contingency.

The two young men frequently stopped at some village *traktir*, or inn, as they passed, to refresh themselves with a meal of peasant fare and a chat with the village people, whose opinions about his august self Peter loved to learn. Since they had not the slightest idea of the identity of their questioner, the Tsar gathered much information of great value to himself in indicating which way, to use a familiar expression, "the cat jumped" with regard to popular opinion upon some of the important questions of the day.

Most peasants, Peter found, were convinced that the Tsar was more than human. Exaggerated versions of his intelligence and vigour as child and boy had reached them, and it was a common belief that the young prince had been specially sent by Providence to right the wrongs of the Russian people, and to make life for the peasantry a sweet dream of marrow and fatness and exemption from work.

The priests, on the other hand, had widely different ideas upon the subject. The young Tsar, they said, mournfully shaking their heads, was a fine young fellow, no doubt, but his character was full of danger for Holy Russia. He was too liberal and progressive. Progress was the enemy of Russia and of the Holy Church. Russia required no western civilization imported within her peaceful borders. She was not a secular country, but the specially favoured of the church, and foreigners and foreign manners

and so-called civilization would be the curse of the country, and Peter threatened to introduce both. He was all for progress, and the priests did not believe in progress.

Occasionally discussion waxed warm at the traktirs visited by the two young men, and once or twice blows were exchanged.

Once a party of drunken peasants uproariously declared that the Tsar Peter was a mere usurper, and that if he had had his deserts he would have been "put away" long since in some monastery or castle, never more to be heard of. Peter flushed when he heard this, for the question of his right to the throne of Russia was always to him a sore point; whereupon Boris, seeing that his master was annoyed, sprang up and knocked the speaker down. The landlord then rushed in, and finding that two strangers had set a company of his regular customers by the ears, bade them depart from his house that instant.

Peter laughed good-naturedly, but on the landlord becoming abusive he seized the man by the neck and trousers and pitched him upon the top of the stove. Then Boris and the Tsar took the rest of the company, who fought with drunken desperation, and pitched them up, one after the other, to join the landlord, until there were nine men in all huddled together on the wide top of the stove, whining and afraid to come down again.

Peter was perfectly good-humoured throughout, and enjoyed the fun; but the landlord was naturally furious, and when his two tall guests, having paid their reckoning, left the house, he took the opportunity of scrambling down from his prison and going for the village policeman, whom he despatched at full speed after the travellers. The policeman, being well mounted, overtook the tarantass, and explained his mission, when Peter immediately gave orders to the driver to turn the horses' heads and return to the village.

There the pair, to their great amusement and delight, were placed in the village lock-up, pending inquiries by the village council of peasants; and there they still were when, with bells jingling, and horses galloping, and dust flying, and with much shouting and pomp, the Tsar's retinue drove into the place, and pulled up at the traktir.

It so happened that the whole of Peter's late antagonists, including, of course, the landlord, were still present, having all by this time climbed down from the stove. They were discussing, in the highest good-humour and with much self-satisfaction, the promptitude with which the landlord had avenged the insult to his customers, and discussing also what punishment would be suitable for the delinquents now confined in the village lock-up. The arrival of the Tsar's retinue broke up the deliberations, however, and the peasants retired to the far end of the room in order to make way for the crowd of kaftaned and uniformed servants of the Tsar, who quickly monopolized all the tables and chairs, and settled themselves for a quarter of an hour's rest and refreshment.

The visitors were noisy, and took to ill-using the peasants and chaffing the irate landlord. One of them threw a glass of vodka in his face, and asked him if that was the only sort of stuff he had to offer to gentlemen of quality? The landlord sputtered and raged, and, in the pride of his late successful capture of two travellers, threatened. His threats largely increased the merriment of his guests, who thumped him on the back and roared with laughter. One seized him by the nose in order to cause his mouth to open wide, when he dashed down his throat the contents of a huge tumblerful of *kvass*, a kind of beer very nauseous to any palate save that of a Russian peasant. The poor landlord choked and sputtered and abused, but succeeded in escaping out of the room, returning, however, in a few minutes armed with authority in the shape of the *ooriadnik*, or village policeman, whom he requested instantly to "arrest these men."

The little policeman glanced at the uproarious company in a bewildered way. He was not a coward, and he relied much upon the power of the law—of which he was the embodiment—to overawe the minds of all good Russians. Besides, had he not, a few minutes since, successfully arrested and locked up two giants, in comparison with whom these noisy people were mere puppets? He therefore pulled himself together, and tentatively laid his hand upon the arm of one who seemed to

be quieter than the rest of the party; he was smaller, anyhow, and would therefore do very well to practise upon first. But the man shook him off and warned him.

"Don't be a fool," he said; "get out of this and let us alone. Don't you see we could strangle you and the whole villageful of peasants if we pleased? Go home while you can walk on two legs, and let us alone!"

But the plucky little ooriadnik was not so easily discouraged.

"You may threaten as much as you please," he said, "but you will find I am not afraid of a party of tipsy cowards like you. Why, it isn't half-an-hour since I arrested, all by myself, a couple of fellows three times your size. Didn't they fight, too!"

The Tsar's servants interchanged glances.

"Where are the two men you speak of?" some one asked.—"What were they driving in, and where were they coming from?" said another.

"They're in the village lock-up at this moment," said the ooriadnik; "and that's where you'll be in another minute or two."

Some of the party looked serious, some burst into roars of laughter, others started up excitedly.

"You must show us this lock-up first," said the small person whose arrest was half accomplished; "we can't submit to be huddled into a little hole of a place incapable of holding more than the two you have there already!"

"Oh, there's plenty of room for you, never fear!" said the brave ooriadnik. "Come along, by all means, and see for yourself!"

The policeman foresaw an easy way to effect the arrest of at least one or two of those present, and they would serve as hostages for the rest. He would push them in as they stood at the door of the lock-up, and fasten the bolt upon them!

So the whole party adjourned to the lock-up. The door was opened, and there, to the horror of his frightened servants, sat the Tsar of all the Russias, unconcernedly playing cards with Boris the Bear-Hunter.

One official instantly seized the ooriadnik by the throat and pinned him to the wall; another performed the same service on the landlord. Others threw themselves upon the floor at Peter's feet and whined out incoherent reproaches that their beloved sovereign should have trusted himself to travel so far in advance of his faithful servants and guards, and thus lay himself open to outrage of this description.

"What is the matter?" asked Peter; "what's all the disturbance about? Let those men go. Get up, all you fools there, and stop whining; there's no harm done.—Listen, Mr. Landlord. You have had me arrested; very well, here I am. I am the Tsar; but what of that? If I have done wrong, I desire to be treated just as any other delinquent would be treated. Call your village council together, and let's have the inquiry over as quickly as possible. We must push on!"

The landlord, followed by the ooriadnik, both in tears and with loud lamentations, threw themselves at Peter's feet, asking his pardon and pleading ignorance of his identity with their beloved Tsar. But Peter insisted upon being treated exactly as any other offender, and the *moujiks* of the community were convened as quickly as possible to the village court. All these, including the persons whose upheaval upon the stove had been the original cause of all the disturbance, came in terror for their lives—most of them loudly weeping—for there was not one but made sure that the lives of every moujik in the village must of necessity be forfeit, since so terrible an outrage and insult had been inflicted upon the Tsar.

Peter bade the landlord state his case, and instructed the starost, or elder of the community, to question both accuser and accused according to the usual procedure of the village court. But it appeared that both landlord and starost were far too frightened to find their tongues. Then the Tsar took upon himself to state the case. He and his body-servant, he explained, had violently assaulted

the landlord of the inn, together with certain of his customers. There had been provocation, but nevertheless the assault was undoubtedly committed. What was the penalty for assault?

The starost, to whom the Tsar addressed this remark, burst into tears and knelt with his forehead tapping the floor at Peter's feet. All the moujiks followed suit, and for some minutes there was naught to be heard save groanings and whinings and bits of the litany in use in the Russo-Greek Church. But neither the starost nor any of his peers of the community offered a reply.

"Speak up, man!" said the Tsar angrily, and then immediately bursting into one of his loud guffaws. "What's the penalty for assault? Speak! I am determined to be told, and by yourself."

Once more the entire company of peasants made as though they would throw themselves upon the ground and whine and pray as they had done before; but when Peter angrily stamped upon the floor, they all, with one accord, renounced the intention and stood quaking in their places.

"Come, come," said Peter impatiently; "don't be a fool, man. You are here to state the law, and you shall state it! What is the penalty for assault?"

The wretched starost strove to speak, but his lips would not open. He essayed once again, and this time succeeded in whispering,—

"Your High Mercifulness—pardon—it is ten cuts of the knout."

Then his legs failed him once more, and he fell, together with his moujiks, upon the floor, weeping and wailing, and calling upon the Tsar and upon Heaven for mercy. When the hubbub had in part subsided, Peter spoke again.

"Very well," he said. "Ooriadnik, do your duty. Don't be afraid; I prefer to see duty fearlessly done. Take your knout and lay on!"

The unfortunate ooriadnik was sufficiently master of himself to comprehend that it was useless to resist when the Tsar's will had once been expressed. He took his knout in his nerveless hand, and with white face and haggard expression tapped the Tsar's back the necessary number of times, inflicting strokes which would hardly have caused a fly, had one of these insects happened to settle upon Peter's broad back, to raise its head and inquire what the matter was. Then he threw down his knout and grovelled at the Tsar's feet, begging forgiveness.

"Nonsense, man," said Peter, but kindly; "finish your work first, and then we can talk of other matters.—Now, Boris, your turn.—Lay on, ooriadnik, and put a little more muscle into it; this fellow's skin is as hard as leather!"

The ooriadnik, intensely relieved by the Tsar's evident good-humour, laid on with some vigour, and flogged poor Boris in a manner not entirely agreeable to the hunter's feelings, who, nevertheless, did not flinch, though he felt that the young Tsar's manner of amusing himself was somewhat expensive to his friends. Boris lived to learn that this was so indeed. Nothing ever pleased Peter more than to enjoy a hearty laugh at the expense of his familiar companions.

But the ooriadnik's duties were not yet concluded. The Tsar patted him kindly on the back. "Bravo, ooriadnik!" he cried; "you are improving.—Now, then, you gentlemen who threw vodka and kvass at the landlord of the traktir, step out.—Lay on again, ooriadnik, and teach these persons not to waste good vodka!"

Then those servants found that they had committed an error in having assaulted the landlord; for the ooriadnik, having warmed to his work, and remembering the laughter and contempt with which his authority had been treated by these men at the inn, laid on his blows with such good will that the unfortunate culprits howled for mercy, to the huge delight of the Tsar.

After which object-lesson upon the impartiality of true justice, and the duty of respect towards the powers that be, Peter and his retinue resumed their journey.

CHAPTER VII.
A RACE FOR LIFE

It has been already mentioned that Boris had promised to instruct his master in the art of calling various animals. In this art Boris was marvellously expert, and could imitate the cry of the wolf, lynx, and other creatures so exactly that if any member of the particular family whose language he was imitating chanced to be within hearing, it would invariably respond to his call—sometimes to its destruction, if it did not find out in time that it had been made the victim of a gross deception. The practice of this art was a source of unfailing delight and amusement to the Tsar during that weary drive of hundreds of miles through the plains and forests of northern and central Russia; for most of the journey was performed by land, though the Dwina offered a good water-way for a considerable distance.

The aptitude of Boris for imitation extended to the calling of birds as well as beasts, and many were the tree-partridges that were lured by him to their doom, and subsequently eaten by the monarch with much enjoyment as a welcome change from the sour cabbage-soup and black bread and salt, which were for the most part all that the party could get to subsist upon.

It was rarely, indeed, that wolf or lynx ventured to approach close enough to the carriage of the Tsar to permit of a successful shot with his old matchlock; but these animals, wolves especially, were frequently seen at a distance, appearing for an instant amid the gloom of the dense pines, but rapidly disappearing as soon as they had ascertained that they had been deceived. But once, when within two or three days' journey of Moscow, this now favourite pastime of the Tsar came near to involving himself and Boris in a fate which would have saved the present writer the trouble of following any further the fortunes of Boris, and would have caused the history of Russia, and indeed that of Europe, to be written in an altogether different manner, for the stirring pages of the life and work of Peter the Great would never have been penned at all.

Boris, as usual, was reclining easily in the front seat of the travelling carriage, idly smoking and chatting, and now and again, at the bidding of Peter, who occupied the back seat, sending out loud invitations in wolf language, in the hope that some wandering member of the family might happen to be within call and respond to his advances. Of a sudden Boris's cries were answered; a melancholy howl was distinctly heard by both men to proceed from within the heart of the dense forest through which the road lay. The howl appeared to proceed from a distance of half-a-mile, and was instantly followed by a second a little further away. The Tsar quickly sat up, gun in hand, while Boris excitedly reiterated his cries, producing tones so pathetically melancholy that the wolf would be hard-hearted indeed that could resist so touching an appeal for companionship. To his surprise, however, there came not one reply but several; half-a-dozen wolves, seemingly, had heard the invitation, and were hastening to respond to it. This was splendid. The young Tsar was now extremely excited.

"Howl away, Boris," he whispered; "there are several of them. We are sure of a shot this time!"

Nothing loath, Boris continued his howlings, and at each repetition the number of wolves that took part in the responding calls appeared to increase, until some twenty distinct voices could be made out, each coming from a slightly different quarter.

Ivan the driver turned half round and crossed himself; then he spat on the ground—a sure sign of discontent in a Russian; then he addressed the young Tsar with the easy familiarity of an old Russian servant.

"Stop it, Peter, the son of Alexis," he said; "there are too many wolves here! My horses will lose their heads if they see them.—Don't howl any more, Boris Ivanitch, if you love your life!"

Boris himself was looking somewhat grave, for he was well aware of the truth of old Ivan's remark that there were too many wolves—it was a pack, not a doubt of it; and the character of wolves

when in a pack is as different from that of the same animals when alone or in pairs as is the harmless malevolence of a skulking beggar in the streets compared with the mischief-making capacity of an armed and howling mob of roughs and blackguards. But the Tsar had never seen a pack of wolves, and knew little of the dangers of which both Boris and Ivan were well aware; therefore he directed the former to continue his calls, bidding Ivan, at the same time, keep a proper hold upon his horses if he was afraid of them.

Old Ivan crossed himself once more and spat a second time, but he gathered up the reins as the Tsar commanded. As for Boris, he looked graver than ever, and howled in a half-hearted manner.

In a very few moments the vanguard of the wolf-host made its appearance. First one gaunt, gray-pointed snout appeared amid the pines on the right of the road, then another; almost at the same instant three cantering forms hove into view close behind; and two more were seen taking a survey in front of the horses' heads.

Peter was in a high state of excitement; he thought nothing of the danger of the moment—it is doubtful whether he realized it. His gun-barrel was raised and pointed now at one gray form, now at another, as each in turn appeared to offer a better chance of a successful shot. Just as he fired, however, the horses had caught sight of the leaders of the pack, but a few paces from their noses, and the sudden apparition so startled them that all three shied with one accord, bringing the wheel of the tarantass into a gigantic rut, and so nearly upsetting the carriage that the gun flew out of Peter's hands as he clutched at the side of the vehicle to save himself from being pitched out.

The next instant the horses, entirely beyond the control of poor Ivan, were dashing along the road at full gallop, the wolves accelerating their easy canter in order to keep up. It now became apparent that there were many more of these grim-looking creatures present than had at first seemed to be the case; indeed, the wood on either side of the roadway appeared to swarm with their gaunt figures, while numbers followed behind, and a few headed the carriage. Even Peter, now that his gun was lost to him, began to feel that the position was not so agreeable as he had thought; while Boris said little, but watched gravely the slightest movement of the leaders of the wolf-mob, loosening the knife at his side the while and bidding Peter do the same.

"How far to the next post-station, Ivan?" the Tsar shouted presently.

"Twelve versts," Ivan shouted back, without turning his head.

It was all the old man could do to keep the horses' heads straight; so mad were they with terror that they would have rushed wildly into the forest at the side of the road if permitted to do so.

Twelve versts are eight English miles, and Boris was well aware that the wolves would be unlikely to content themselves with passively following or accompanying the carriage for so great a distance; they would, he knew, attack the horses before very long, for their excitement would carry them away into what wolves with cool heads would consider an indiscretion. Occasionally a wolf would push ahead of its fellows, impelled by the desire to have the first taste of blood, advancing its gray nose so close to the side of the carriage that Boris or his master was able to aim a vicious dig at it, and once or twice a howl of pain attested to the fact that the blow had reached and either scratched or gashed the indiscreet assailant.

And so, for several miles, matters remained. Boris began to take heart, for half the journey had been accomplished, and if nothing more serious were attempted by the wolves than had been ventured by them up till now, there was no reason to fear any evil consequences. The wolves would pursue them thus up to within a few yards of the village, and then slink back into the woods to reflect upon what might have been had they been more enterprising.

Peter clearly shared the favourable view of Boris; no gloomy fears oppressed his sturdy mind. He laughed as he gashed at the trespassers, calling them all the bad names in the Russian vocabulary, including "cholera," which is a favourite term of abuse in that country, for sufficiently apparent reasons, and "Pharaoh," which, with less obvious point, is to a Russian the most irritating and offensive of all the bad names you can call him.

But while the two young men were thus busily engaged in the hinder portion of the carriage, a cry from old Ivan on the box caused them to desist from their exciting occupation and to look ahead. Not a moment too soon had the old driver uttered his warning note. Three huge wolves had pushed in front of their fellows and had commenced their attack upon the horses, just as Boris had feared would be the case. The fierce brutes were leaping up on either side, attempting to seize the horses by the throat, but making their springs as yet in a half-hearted way, as though they had not quite worked themselves up to the necessary point of audacity. The poor horses, however, at each spring of their assailants, jerked up their heads in terror, losing their step, and thus causing a new danger, for at the present rate of speed a stumble from any of the three might have had fatal results to the occupants of the carriage.

Boris realized the danger in a moment. Quickly directing his companion to remain where he was and attend to the attack from the rear, he sprang upon the coach-box, and thence upon the back of the shaft-horse. The other two horses were attached to the carriage by pieces of rope only, fastened to leather collars about their necks; and it was these two outsiders against whose flanks and throats the wolves were now directing their attacks. Boris with difficulty obtained a position upon the back of one of them, lying along its spine and hitching his feet into the rope at either side, while he clasped the leather collar with one hand and held his long sharp knife in the other. In this awkward and insecure position he managed to slash at the wolves, two of which were now making determined springs, as though resolved at all hazards to pull the unfortunate horse down and put an end to this prolonged chase.

It was a good fight. Boris aimed his blows well, and before a couple of hundred yards had been covered one of the rash assailants, leaping rather higher than before, received a dig from the big knife that sent him yelping and somersaulting among his fellows, and a detachment of them quickly fell behind to eat him up. This did not affect the rest, however, and Boris found that he had about as much as he could do to beat off the constantly increasing number of assailants.

Meanwhile another warning from old Ivan caused Boris to look up for a moment, when he became aware that the second outsider was in need of instant assistance. A large wolf had succeeded in effecting for a moment a hold upon the throat of the poor brute, which had, however, either shaken or kicked it off again with its galloping front legs. Peter was fully occupied in beating off the increasingly audacious attacks of the rearguard, while Ivan could, of course, give him no assistance. Boris quickly made up his mind that something must be done, and that instantly, or one of the horses must inevitably be pulled down, with fatal results to all parties. Thereupon Boris slashed with his knife the rope which attached the left-hand horse; and as the animal, feeling itself free, darted towards the forest, he was pleased to see that it was immediately followed by a dozen gray pursuers, which were thus drawn away from the main body. Horse and assailants quickly disappeared among the trees, whither the historian is unable to follow them, and the last tragedy of that steed, and its escape or death, was played out far away in the heart of the pine forest.

And now recommenced that fierce fight between Boris and his numerous antagonists which had been interrupted for a moment by the last recorded incident. Deftly as Boris fought, the wolves were so aggressive and numerous that it soon became apparent to the hunter that they were gaining ground upon him, and that in all probability they would succeed before long in pulling down one of the two remaining horses, which he was striving so determinedly to defend. Boris was accustomed to make up his mind quickly in cases of emergency. He shouted back to the Tsar to hand up to Ivan the long bear-spear which was strapped to the side of the tarantass. With this weapon he directed Ivan to prod at those wolves which attacked the shaft-horse, while he himself confined his attention to those whose springs were aimed at the remaining outsider. Old Ivan rose to the occasion; he gathered the reins in one hand, and with the other struck manfully at the brutes which ever swarmed at flank and throat of the poor shafter. Some of his blows grazed the horse's shoulder and neck, causing it to rush

on with even greater speed. The post-village was now but a mile away, and if only Boris could keep off the swarming brutes for a few minutes longer the Tsar would be safe.

On flew the horses, and on hacked Boris; while Peter, in the carriage, slashed at the hindmost wolves, and old Ivan prodded bravely and shouted loudly at those in front. If things were to go wrong, and he should be unable to keep the leaders at bay until the Tsar was in safety, Boris knew what he would do.

Meanwhile the chase went on for another half-mile. Then the outside horse, harassed beyond endurance by the ever-increasing number of his assailants, stumbled repeatedly. In an instant Boris had slashed in two the cords which attached him to the vehicle, and freed from the incubus of the carriage, the poor animal darted forward and turned aside into the forest, Boris himself still lying full length upon its back, but assuming as quickly as he could a sitting posture. In this position, still slashing at the wolves which swarmed about him, and waving adieu to the Tsar with his left hand, he disappeared from sight; and in the distance the horrified Peter heard the clatter of his horse's hoofs as the devoted hunter was borne away from him to his doom.

For one wild moment Peter was for bidding Ivan direct the carriage in pursuit; but the absurdity of such a course was apparent on the face of it, and the Tsar was obliged, with grief and reluctance, to leave his faithful servant and friend to his fate. At least half the wolves or more had followed Boris into the depths of the forest, and Peter and Ivan together succeeded in keeping the rest at bay long enough to allow the panting shafter to drag the carriage in safety to within sight of the village, when, with a gasp of despair, the poor creature stumbled and fell, causing the carriage to stop suddenly with a jolt that almost unseated the driver. Peter, with that personal courage in which he has never been surpassed, leaped out to cut the traces and allow the gallant animal which had served him so well to gallop for life. Seeing him on foot, the wolves, unable even now to overcome altogether their natural terror of man, drew off for a moment, and in that moment Peter freed the horse, which dashed madly away into the woods like its fellows, followed by all the wolves with the exception of two or three which preferred to hang about the two men as they walked on towards the village, but not daring to approach within striking distance of spear or knife. When within a few yards of the first dwelling-house of the village, these disappeared into the forest also, looking round once or twice ere they finally retreated, and licking their lips, as though their imagination dwelt upon the delights of a feast that might have been.

The Tsar was morose and silent; and his attendants, who arrived within an hour after himself, and who declared that they had met neither wolves nor Boris, left the young monarch to his supper, avowing to one another that they had never yet seen the Tsar so terrible to look upon.

CHAPTER VIII.
BORIS AND HIS FELLOW-OFFICERS

The young Tsar was himself surprised, as he sat alone at his evening meal, to find how very heavily the loss of poor Boris weighed upon him. He had scarcely realized how closely the young hunter had wound himself already around his heart—a heart which, in spite of its hardness and waywardness, was capable of forming the warmest attachments. Peter was all through his life on the look-out for men who were after his own ideal, and upon whom he could rely for assistance in carrying out the vast schemes and plans for the good of his people, and the development and aggrandizement of his country, with which his brain was filled from the first. Such a man Peter thought he had found in Boris—one upon whose absolute faithfulness he could rely, and whose courage, as he had seen already more than once, was equal to any emergency. He felt that he could have trained Boris to be the ideal man for his purposes, to be employed far or near with equal confidence, and in any capacity that seemed good to his employer; and instead, here was the poor fellow gone already, a martyr to his devotion to himself! "Why are there not more of my poor Russians like this one?" thought the young Tsar; "and where am I to lay my hand upon such another—even *one*?" It certainly was most unfortunate and deplorable; so no wonder the Tsar's servants found their master in his most dangerous mood, and left him, as soon as might be, to himself.

Peter ate his cabbage-soup, and sighed as he ate. Why had he not anticipated the sudden action of Boris, and sternly forbidden him to sacrifice himself—ah, why indeed? Peter was not accustomed to personal devotion of this sort. He had not come across a Boris before this one, or he might have guessed what the brave fellow would do, and could have pulled him back into the carriage at the last moment. He would rather have fed those thrice-accursed gray brutes upon the whole of his retinue than that they should have feasted upon that brave heart. Poor Bear-Hunter! he had killed his last bear. What a fight there must have been at the very last before he permitted the skulking brutes to crowd around and pull him down!

Wrapped in these sad reflections, Peter sat before his neglected bowl of soup, when of a sudden the door opened, and the apparition of the very subject of his dismal reflections stood before him. Bootless, dishevelled, and with his clothes, what was left of them, blood-stained and in rags, was it the ghost of Boris as he had appeared at his last moment on earth? Peter was not superstitious, wonderfully little so for a Russian, but for a full minute he gazed in doubt and uncertainty upon the apparition before him. Then he burst into one of his very loudest guffaws.

"Boris!" he cried. "Yes! it is certainly Boris. Come here, my brother. I was already mourning you for dead. How did you escape those accursed gray brutes? Here is a hunter indeed! Come here, my brother." Peter kissed his friend upon both cheeks; then administered a pat on the back which might have felled an ox, laughed aloud once more, and poured into a tumbler an immense draught of strong vodka. "There," he said, "sit down and drink that, my tsar of hunters, and tell me all about it."

"There's little to tell your Majesty," said Boris, taking a big sip at the spirits. "God was very merciful to me; and as the wolves rushed in and dragged the poor horse down, which they did almost immediately after I left you, I grabbed at the branch of a pine and hauled myself up out of their reach just in time—not quite in time to save my boots, in fact; for two active fellows jumped up and pulled them both off my legs. I hope they choked the brutes! Afterwards I settled myself comfortably in the branches of the tree, and threw fir-cones at them while they pulled poor Vaiska the horse to pieces and fought over his carcass. In five minutes there was not as much of Vaiska left as would make a meal for a sparrow. When they had eaten Vaiska, they sat around my tree, watching me and hoping that I should soon let go and fall into their jaws. I howled at them in their own language instead, and they howled back at me. What I said seemed greatly to excite them, for they ran round the tree, and

jumped up at me, and licked their lips. I climbed down to a point just above that which they could reach by leaping, and there I reclined at my ease and slashed at them with my knife as long as they were inclined for the game. When they grew tired of it, they sat round the tree licking their chops and looking up at me, and we exchanged complimentary remarks at intervals in their language.

"After a while the rumble and jingle of the carriages of your Majesty's retinue was heard approaching. The wolves pricked up their ears to listen. They made as though they would go back to the road at first, in the hope of picking up more horse-flesh—greedy brutes! as if Vaiska was not enough for them—but thought better of it, there was so much noise and rattle; and as the carriages came nearer and nearer, they grew more and more anxious, until at length, with a final chorus of abuse levelled at me as I sat up in my perch, they one after the other retired into the wood. Then I came down and ran for the village; and here I am, alive to serve your Majesty for many a long year, I trust."

"Glad am I to see you, my prince of hunters," said the Tsar earnestly. "But what of your wounds—is there anything serious? You look as though you had been half-way down their throats; you must have had a nasty gash somewhere to have got all that blood on you. Call the surgeon and let him see to it. I can't afford to lose so much of your good blood, my Boris; Russia has not too much of the right quality."

Boris laughed, and glanced at his saturated shirt and waistcoat. "It's all wolf's blood," he said, "and I wish there were more of it; I haven't a scratch." And this was the simple truth.

So ended happily an adventure which came near to depriving Russia of her greatest son and me of a hero.

Two days after this the Tsar with his following reached the capital, and Boris was given a commission in one of the Streltsi regiments, while retaining his place at the side of his master as body-attendant. In the ranks of the Streltsi our hunter soon learned the simple drill which the soldiers of the Russia of that day had to acquire. The Streltsi were at this time practically the only regular regiments of the country, though they were not destined to remain so long under the progressive rule of their present enlightened Tsar. Being the one armed power in the state, and having on several occasions successfully taken advantage of their position, the Streltsi had been loaded with privileges wrung from rulers and statesmen who were afraid of them, and their present position was most enviable. The men were allowed to marry, and to live at their private homes; to carry on any business or trade they pleased by way of adding to the substantial incomes which they already enjoyed at the expense of the state; and, in a word, to do very much as they liked as long as they attended the easy drills and parades which the regulations enjoined. Hence Boris had plenty of time to spare from his military duties to devote to attendance upon his beloved master.

Peter had a double object in placing Boris in a Streltsi regiment. He was anxious that the hunter should learn all that there was to be learned in so poor a military school of the life and duties of the soldier; but chiefly because he had good reason to mistrust the Streltsi as a body, and it suited his purpose to distribute a few of his more enlightened and devoted adherents among the various regiments, in order that he might rest assured that in case of disaffection among the troops he would hear of it at the first whisper. Peter had not forgotten a certain horrible scene of violence enacted before his eyes by these very regiments in the days of his early childhood, when the entire corps had revolted, and, in presence of himself and his young co-Tsar, had massacred their chiefs and others in the square of the palace of the Kremlin. It is probable that, young as he had been at that time, Peter never forgave the Streltsi for that terrible experience, and that his distrust of them as a danger to the state dated from that day. Growing as time went on, his hatred of them culminated in the horrors attending their ultimate extermination, to which brief reference will be made at a later stage of this narrative.

Meanwhile Boris hastened to acquire all that he could pick up of military knowledge. He did not like this city life, accustomed as he was to the free and healthy open-air existence of the old Dubinka days, neither did he like his fellows in the Streltsi regiment to which he had been appointed;

but it was enough for our faithful hunter to know that it was the Tsar's desire that he should associate with these men: so long as he could render service to his beloved master, Boris was content. Nor, in truth, was Boris popular with his comrades. It was well known that the new-comer was the *protégé* and favourite of the Tsar, and he was distrusted on this account; for the conscience of the regiment was not altogether void of offence towards the young head of the realm, and it was more than suspected that Peter had on that very account placed Boris as a kind of spy upon their inner counsels.

The reason for the dislike entertained by the Streltsi for their Tsar was this:—The elder brother of Peter, Ivan, was still alive and physically in good health; but, as is well known, though he had acted at one time as co-Tsar with Peter, Ivan was quite incapable, by reason of the weakness of his intellect, of taking any real part in the government of the country, and Peter, by his own brother's earnest wish, as well as by the expressed desire of the nation, had assumed the sole authority over the destinies of the country. The Streltsi, full of their own importance as the actual backbone of the state, and on this account "busy-bodies" to a man, were never perfectly satisfied with this state of affairs, and evinced at all times a nervous anxiety as to their duty in the matter. Ivan, they considered, was the real Tsar or Cæsar, successor to the Byzantine and Roman Cæsars, and therefore the lord, by divine right, of Holy Russia. It mattered little that he was incompetent and unwilling to govern; that was regrettable, no doubt, but it did not justify another, either Peter or any one else, sitting in his place and holding a sceptre which did not belong to him. The Streltsi were probably perfectly honest in their opinions. They had nothing to gain by a revolution; their position was assured, and a very good position it was. It was the feeling of responsibility which weighed upon them, and filled them with a restless sense that they ought by rights to interfere.

Peter, acute as he was, undoubtedly realized the exact state of affairs, and was well aware that a constant danger of trouble with his Streltsi regiments stood in the way of the many reforms and projects with which his active brain teemed at all times; and it is probable that he was on the look-out even now for a plausible excuse to rid himself of an incubus which he felt was inconsistent with his own ideas of the fitness of things and with the spirit of the times. Boris was therefore, more or less, that very thing which the regiment believed him to be—namely, a spy upon their actions and intentions.

The hunter was far too simple-minded to comprehend that this was his position. As a matter of fact, unlettered peasant as he was, he knew little of the history of the last few years. He was aware, indeed, of the existence of Ivan, but he had no suspicion whatever of the good faith of his companions towards the Tsar; all of which became, moreover, so apparent to his fellow Streltsi, that they soon learned to look indulgently upon "simple Boris," as he was called, as one who was too much a fool to be a dangerous spy. Hence, though never openly airing their views before their latest recruit, the young officers of the regiment gradually began to disregard the presence of Boris, and to indulge in hints and innuendoes referring to the matter which they had at heart, even though Boris was in the room and sharing in the conversation.

Now Boris, as is the case with many others, was by no means such a fool as he looked. He heard references to matters which he did not understand, and which he knew he was not intended to understand. He observed frequently that parties of officers seated dining at the eating-houses frequented by the regiment would glance at him as he entered the room and moderate their loud tones to a whisper. He overheard such sentences as—"The priests count for much, and they are with us!" or again, "Who is to persuade the Grand Duke that his brother is a mere usurper?" And once Boris thought he caught the Tsar's name, as he entered the room, received with groans, and striding to the table with flushed face, asked whose name the company had received with these manifestations of dislike; whereupon the Streltsi officers had laughed aloud, and replied that they had spoken of a dog which had stolen a bone that didn't belong to it.

The simple-minded Boris laughed also, and said, "What dog?"

Whereat the company roared with laughter, and the major replied with streaming eyes,—

"Oh, a big dog I saw up at the Kremlin, that found a little dog with a nice bone, and bow-wowed at him till the little dog thought he had better let it go with a good grace. We all thought this so mean of the big dog that we hooted him and drank his health backwards!"

Afterwards Boris recalled this and other curious sayings of his companions, and revolved them in his mind as he lay at the Tsar's door at night.

CHAPTER IX.
ONE SWORD AGAINST FIVE

The result of Boris's reflections was that he became suspicious and unhappy. He felt that his position was a delicate and difficult one, and that it would be impossible for him to maintain it under present conditions. Putting two and two together, he had concluded that there was something existing in the minds of his brother officers to which he was no party, and which he feared—though he hesitated to believe it—might be treason against his beloved master. If this should prove to be the case, he reflected, what course ought he to pursue? Should he inform the Tsar, and thus be the means of terrible trouble to the regiment of which he was a member, or allow matters to take their course in the hope that either his suspicions would prove unfounded, or that his companions might shortly see the iniquity of their ways, and return to full loyalty, as behoved true officers of the Tsar? After all, it was merely a suspicion; all that talk about big dogs and little dogs might be the purest nonsense. What right had he to take serious action upon so feeble a suspicion? Boris finally decided that he would do nothing rash and ill-considered; for the generous Tsar would be the first to laugh at him for jumping at ill-based conclusions, and Boris was very sensitive to derision, especially at Peter's mouth.

Very soon after the discussion on canine iniquity recorded above, Boris had the decision as to his duty in these trying circumstances taken out of his hands by the workings of destiny. Sitting over his dinner at the restaurant patronized by the officers of the Streltsi, he found himself listening in spite of himself to the conversation of a group of his companions dining at a table close to his own. The vodka had flowed pretty freely, it appeared, and tongues were growing looser and slipping the leash which restraint and discretion usually put upon them in the presence of Boris. The major, Platonof, was the noisiest speaker—he of the dog story; and Boris several times recognized his somewhat strident voice raised above that of his fellows, who, however, generally hushed him down before his words became distinctly audible. Once Boris overheard his own name spoken by one of the younger officers, whereupon the major said aloud,—

"What! simple Boris—our Bear-hunter? Why, he's a capital fellow is our Boris—he's one of us—we needn't be afraid of Boris.—Need we, Boris?" he continued, looking tipsily over his shoulder at the hunter. "You'll fight for the lord of Russia, won't you, Boris, in case of need?"

"I'll fight for the Tsar with my last drop of blood, if that's what you mean," said Boris, flushing.

"Say the Tsar that should be—the friend of the church and of the priests—in fact, the lord of Russia!" continued Platonof.

"Certainly the lord of Russia," said Boris, "but why the Tsar that 'should be'?"

"Because," hiccoughed the major solemnly, "while Peter remains upon the throne, the lord of Russia reigns only in our hearts. When the Streltsi have ousted the big dog from the little dog's kennel—Peter being the big dog—and given the little dog back his bone—that's Ivan—then—"

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.