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HONORÉ DE BALZAC

FOLK-TALES OF NAPOLEON

Оноре де Бальзак
Folk-Tales of Napoleon

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Folk-Tales of Napoleon Napoleonder from the Russian; The Napoleon of the People from the French of Honoré De Balzac

INTRODUCTION

Most of the literature that has its origin in the life and career of a great man may be grouped and classified under two heads: history and biography. The part that relates to the man's actions, and to the influence that such actions have had in shaping the destinies of peoples and states, belongs in the one class; while the part that derives its interest mainly from the man's personality, and deals chiefly with the mental and moral characteristics of which his actions were the outcome, goes properly into the other. The value of the literature included in these two classes depends almost wholly upon truth; that is, upon the precise correspondence of the statements made with the real facts of the man's life and career. History is worse than useless if it does not accurately chronicle and describe events; and biography is valueless and misleading if it does not truly set forth individual character.

There is, however, a kind of great-man literature in which truth is comparatively unimportant, and that is the literature of popular legend and tradition. Whether it purports to be historical or biographical, or both, it derives its interest and value from the light that it throws upon the temperament and character of the people who originate it, rather than from the amount of truth contained in the statements that it makes about the man.

The folk-tales of Napoleon Bonaparte herewith presented, if judged from the viewpoint of the historian or the biographer, are absurdly and grotesquely untrue; but to the anthropologist and the student of human nature they are extremely valuable as self-revelations of national character; and even to the historian and the biographer they have some interest as evidences of the profoundly deep impression made by Napoleon's personality upon two great peoples – the Russians and the French.

The first story, which is entitled "Napoleonder," is of Russian origin, and was put into literary form, or edited, by Alexander Amphiteatrof of St. Petersburg. It originally appeared as a feuilleton in the St. Petersburg "Gazette" of December 13, 1901. As a characteristic specimen of Russian peasant folk-lore, it seems to me to have more than ordinary interest and value. The treatment of the supernatural may seem, to Occidental readers, rather daring and irreverent, but it is perfectly in harmony with the Russian peasant's anthropomorphic conception of Deity, and should be taken with due allowance for the educational limitations of the story-teller and his auditors. The Russian muzhik often brings God and the angels into his folk-tales, and does so without the least idea of treating them disrespectfully. He makes them talk in his own language because he has no other language; and if the talk seems a little grotesque and irreverent, it is due to the low level of the narrator's literary culture, and not to any intention, on his part, of treating God and the angels with levity. The whole aim of the story is a moral and religious one. The narrator is trying to show that sympathy and mercy are better than selfish ambition, and that war is not only immoral but irrational. The conversation between God, the angels, and the Devil is a mere prologue, intended to bring Napoleon and Ivan-angel on the stage and lay the foundation of the plot. The story-teller's keen sense of fun and humor is shown in many little touches, but he never means to be irreverent. The whole legend is set forth in the racy, idiomatic, highly elliptical language of the common Russian muzhik, and is therefore extremely difficult of translation; but I have tried to preserve, as far as possible, the spirit and flavor of the original.

The French story was first reduced to writing – or at least put into literary form – by Honoré de Balzac, and appeared under the title of "The Napoleon of the People" in the third chapter of Balzac's "Country Doctor." It purports to be the story of Napoleon's life and career as related to a group of French peasants by one of his old soldiers – a man named Goguelat. It covers more time chronologically than the Russian story does, and deals much more fully and circumstantially with historical incidents and events: but it seems to me to be distinctly inferior to the Russian tale in power of creative imagination, unity of conception, skill of artistic treatment, and depth of human interest. The French peasant regards Napoleon merely as a great leader and conqueror, "created to be the father of soldiers," and aided, if not directly sent, by God, to show forth the power and the glory of France. The Russian peasant, more thoughtful by nature as well as less excitable and combative in temperament, admits that Napoleon was sent on earth by God, but connects him with one of the deep problems of life by using him to show the divine nature of sympathy and pity, and the cruelty, immorality, and unreasonableness of aggressive war. The only feature that the two tales have in common is the recognition of the supernatural as a controlling factor in Napoleon's life. The French peasant believes that he had a guiding star; that he was advised and directed by a familiar spirit in the shape of a "Red Man"; and that he was saved from dangers and death by virtue of a secret compact with the Supreme Being. The Russian peasant asserts that he was created by the Devil, and that God, after having given him a soul by accident, first used him as a means of punishing the Russian people for their sins, and then made him really a man by inspiring him with the human feelings of sympathy and compassion. In the French story Napoleon appears as a great military leader, whose life and career reflect honor and glory upon France. In the Russian story he is merely the leading actor in a sort of moral drama, or historical mystery-play, intended to show the divine nature of sympathy and compassion, the immorality of war, and the essential solidarity and brotherhood of all mankind.

GEORGE KENNAN.

* * * * *

NAPOLEONDER¹

Long ago – but not so very long ago; our grandfathers remember it – the Lord God wanted to punish the people of the world for their wickedness. So he began to think how and by what means he could punish them, and he called a council of his angels and archangels to talk about it. Says the archangel Michael to the Lord God: "Shake them up, the recreants, with an earthquake."

"We've tried that," says the Lord God. "Once upon a time we jolted to pieces Sodom and Gomorrah, but it didn't teach them anything. Since then pretty much all the towns have become Sodoms and Gomorrah."

"How about famine?" says the archangel Gabriel.

"It would be too bad for the babies," replies the Lord God. "Famine would kill the babies. And, besides that, the cattle must have food – they're not to blame."

"Drown them with a flood," suggests Raphael.

"Clean impossible!" says the Lord God. "Because, in the first place, I took an oath once that there should be no more floods, and I set the rainbow in the sky for an assurance. In the second place, the rascally sinners have become cunning; they'll get on steamboats and sail all over the flood."

Then all the archangels were perplexed, and began to screw about in their seats, trying to invent or think of some calamity that would bring the wicked human race to its senses and stir up its conscience. But they had been accustomed, time out of mind, to do good rather than evil; they had forgotten all about the wickedness of the world; and they couldn't think of a single thing that would be of any use.

Then suddenly up comes Ivan-angel, a simple-minded soul whom the Lord God had appointed to look after the Russian muzhiks. He comes up and reports: "Lord, Satan is outside there, asking for you. He doesn't dare to come in, because he smells bad [Footnote 2: That is, he brings with him the sulphurous odor of hell.]; so he's waiting in the entry."

Then the Lord God was rejoiced. "Call Satan in!" he ordered. "I know that rogue perfectly well, and he has come in the very nick of time. A scamp like that will be sure to think of something."

Satan came in. His face was as black as tanned calfskin, his voice was hoarse, and a long tail hung down from under his overcoat.

"If you so order," he says, "I'll distribute your calamities for you with my own hands."

"Go ahead with your distribution," says the Lord God; "nobody shall hinder you."

"Will you permit me," Satan says, "to bring about an invasion of foreigners?"

The Lord God shook his finger at Satan and cried: "Is that all you can think of? And you so wise!"

"Excuse me," Satan says. "Why doesn't my plan show wisdom?"

"Because," replies the Lord God, "you propose to afflict the people with war, and war is just what they want. They're all the time fighting among themselves, one people with another, and that's the very thing I want to punish them for."

"Yes," says Satan, "they're greedy for war, but that's only because they have never yet seen a real warrior. Send them a regular conqueror, and they'll soon drop their tails between their legs and cry, 'Have mercy, Lord! Save us from the man of blood!'"

The Lord God was surprised. "Why do you say, my little brother, that the people have never seen a real warrior? The Tsar Herod was a conqueror; the Tsar Alexander subdued a wonderful lot of people; Ivan-Tsar destroyed Kazan; Mamai-Tsar the furious came with all his hordes; and the Tsar Peter, and the great fighter Anika – how many more conquerors do you want?"

¹ The Russian peasant's name for Napoleon Bonaparte. The final syllable "der" has perhaps been added because to the ear of the peasant "Napoleon" sounds clipped and incomplete, as "Alexan" would sound to us without the "der."

"I want Napoleonder," says Satan.

"Napleonder!" cries the Lord God. "Who's he? Where did he come from?"

"He's a certain little man," Satan says, "who may not be wise enough to hurt, but he's terribly fierce in his habits."

The Lord God says to the archangel Gabriel: "Look in the Book of Life, Gabriel, and see if we've got Napoleonder written down."

The archangel looked and looked, but he couldn't look up any such person.

"There isn't any kind of Napoleonder in the Book," he says. "Satan is a liar. We haven't got Napoleonder written down anywhere."

Then Satan replies: "It isn't strange that you can't find Napoleonder in the Book of Life, because you write in that Book only the names of those who were born of human fathers and mothers, and who have navels. Napoleonder never had a father or a mother, and, moreover, he hasn't any navel – and that's so surprising that you might exhibit him for money."

The Lord God was greatly astonished. "How did your Napoleonder ever get into the world?" he says.

"In this way," Satan replies. "I made him, as a doll, just for amusement, out of sand. At that very time, you, Lord, happened to be washing your holy face; and, not being careful, you let a few drops of the water of life splash over. They fell from heaven right exactly on Napoleonder's head, and he immediately took breath and became a man. He is living now, not very near nor very far away, on the island of Buan, in the middle of the ocean-sea. There is a little less than a verst of land in the island, and Napoleonder lives there and watches geese. Night and day he looks after the geese, without eating, or drinking, or sleeping, or smoking; and his only thought is – how to conquer the whole world."

The Lord God thought and thought, and then he ordered: "Bring him to me."

Satan at once brought Napoleonder into the bright heaven. The Lord God looked at him, and saw that he was a military man with shining buttons.

"I have heard, Napoleonder," says the Lord God, "that you want to conquer the whole world."

"Exactly so," replies Napoleonder; "that's what I want very much to do."

"And have you thought," says the Lord God, "that when you go forth to conquer you will crush many peoples and shed rivers of blood?"

"That's all the same to me," says Napoleonder; "the important thing for me is – how can I subdue the whole world."

"And will you not feel pity for the killed, the wounded, the burned, the ruined, and the dead?"

"Not in the least," says Napoleonder. "Why should I feel pity? I don't like pity. So far as I can remember, I was never sorry for anybody or anything in my life, and I never shall be."

Then the Lord God turns to the angels and says: "Messrs. Angels, this seems to be the very fellow for our business." Then to Napoleonder he says: "Satan was perfectly right. You are worthy to be the instrument of my wrath, because a pitiless conqueror is worse than earthquake, famine, or deluge. Go back to the earth, Napoleonder; I turn over to you the whole world, and through you the whole world shall be punished."

Napleonder says: "Give me armies and luck, and I'll do my best."

Then the Lord God says: "Armies you shall have, and luck you shall have; and so long as you are merciless you shall never be defeated in battle; but remember that the moment you begin to feel sorry for the shedding of blood – of your own people or of others – that moment your power will end. From that moment your enemies will defeat you, and you shall finally be made a prisoner, be put into chains, and be sent back to Buan Island to watch geese. Do you understand?"

"Exactly so," says Napoleonder. "I understand, and I will obey. I shall never feel pity."

Then the angels and the archangels began to say to God: "Lord, why have you laid upon him such a frightful command? If he goes forth so, without mercy, he will kill every living soul on earth – he will leave none for seed!"

"Be silent!" replied the Lord God. "He will not conquer long. He is altogether too brave; because he fears neither others nor himself. He thinks he will keep from pity, and does not know that pity, in the human heart, is stronger than all else, and that not a man living is wholly without it."

"But," the archangels say, "he is not a man; he is made of sand."

The Lord God replies: "Then you think he didn't receive a soul when my water of life fell on his head?"

Napoleonder at once gathered together a great army speaking twelve languages, and went forth to war. He conquered the Germans, he conquered the Turks, he subdued the Swedes and the Poles. He reaped as he marched, and left bare the country through which he passed. And all the time he remembers the condition of success – pity for none. He cuts off heads, burns villages, outrages women, and tramples children under his horses' hoofs. He desolates the whole Mohammedan kingdom – and still he is not sated. Finally he marches on a Christian country – on Holy Russia.

In Russia then the Tsar was Alexander the Blessed – the same Tsar who stands now on the top of the column in Petersburg-town and blesses the people with a cross, and that's why he is called "the Blessed."

When he saw Napoleonder marching against him with twelve languages, Alexander the Blessed felt that the end of Russia was near. He called together his generals and field-m Marshals, and said to them: "Messrs. Generals and Field-m Marshals, how can I check this Napoleonder? He is pressing us terribly hard."

The generals and field-m Marshals reply: "We can't do anything, your Majesty, to stop Napoleonder, because God has given him a word."

"What kind of a word?"

"This kind: 'Bonaparty.'"

"But what does 'Bonaparty' mean, and why is a single word so terrible?"

"It means, your Majesty, six hundred and sixty-six – the number of the Beast [Footnote 3: A reference to the Beast of the Apocalypse. "The number of the beast is the number of a man: and his number is Six hundred threescore and six" (Rev. xiii. 18).]; and it is terrible because when Napoleonder sees, in a battle, that the enemy is very brave, that his own strength is not enough, and that his own men are falling fast [Footnote 4: Literally, "lying down with their bones."], he immediately conjures with this same word, 'Bonaparty,' and at that instant – as soon as the word is pronounced – all the soldiers that have ever served under him and have died for him on the field of battle come back from beyond the grave. He leads them afresh against the enemy, as if they were alive, and nothing can stand against them, because they are a ghostly force, not an army of this world."

Alexander the Blessed grew sad; but, after thinking a moment, he said: "Messrs. Generals and Field-m Marshals, we Russians are a people of more than ordinary courage. We have fought with all nations, and never yet before any of them have we laid our faces in the dust. If God has brought us, at last, to fight with corpses – his holy will be done! We will go against the dead!"

So he led his army to the field of Kulikova, and there waited for the miscreant Napoleonder. And soon afterward, Napoleonder, the evil one, sends him an envoy with a paper saying, "Submit, Alexander Blagoslovenni, and I will show you favor above all others."

But Alexander the Blessed was a proud man, who held fast his self-respect. He would not speak to the envoy, but he took the paper that the envoy had brought, and drew on it an insulting picture, with the words, "Is this what you want?" and sent it back to Napoleonder.

Then they fought and slashed one another on the field of Kulikova, and in a short time or a long time our men began to overcome the forces of the enemy. One by one they shot or cut down all of Napoleonder's field-m Marshals, and finally drew near to Napoleonder himself.

"Your time has come!" they cry to him. "Surrender!"

But the villain sits there on his horse, rolling his goggle-eyes like an owl, and grinning.

"Wait a minute," he says coolly. "Don't be in too big a hurry. A tale is short in telling, but the deed is long a-doing."

Then he pronounces his conjuring-word, "Bonaparty" – six hundred and sixty-six, the number of the Beast.

Instantly there is a great rushing sound, and the earth is shaken as if by an earthquake. Our soldiers look – and drop their hands. In all parts of the field appear threatening battalions, with bayonets shining in the sun, torn flags waving over terrible hats of fur, and tramp! tramp! tramp! on come the thousands of phantom men, with faces yellow as camomile, and empty holes under their bushy eyebrows.

Alexander, the Blessed Tsar, was stricken with terror. Terror-stricken were all his generals and field-marschals. Terror-stricken also was the whole Russian army. Shaking with fear, they wavered at the advance of the dead, gave way suddenly in a panic, and finally fled in whatever direction their eyes happened to look.

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