

DUMAS
ALEXANDRE

VANINKA

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Vaninka

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Vaninka / Celebrated Crimes:

Alexandre Dumas

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About the end of the reign of the Emperor Paul I – that is to say, towards the middle of the first year of the nineteenth century – just as four o'clock in the afternoon was sounding from the church of St. Peter and St. Paul, whose gilded vane overlooks the ramparts of the fortress, a crowd, composed of all sorts and conditions of people, began to gather in front of a house which belonged to General Count Tchermayloff, formerly military governor of a fair-sized town in the government of Pultava. The first spectators had been attracted by the preparations which they saw had been made in the middle of the courtyard for administering torture with the knout. One of the general's serfs, he who acted as barber, was to be the victim.

Although this kind of punishment was a common enough sight in St. Petersburg, it nevertheless attracted all passers-by when it was publicly administered. This was the occurrence which had caused a crowd, as just mentioned, before General Tchermayloff's house.

The spectators, even had they been in a hurry, would have had no cause to complain of being kept waiting, for at half-past four a young man of about five-and-twenty, in the handsome uniform of an aide-de-camp, his breast covered with decorations, appeared on the steps at the farther end of the court-yard in front

of the house. These steps faced the large gateway, and led to the general's apartments.

Arrived on the steps, the young aide-de-camp stopped a moment and fixed his eyes on a window, the closely drawn curtains of which did not allow him the least chance of satisfying his curiosity, whatever may have been its cause. Seeing that it was useless and that he was only wasting time in gazing in that direction, he made a sign to a bearded man who was standing near a door which led to the servants' quarters. The door was immediately opened, and the culprit was seen advancing in the middle of a body of serfs and followed by the executioner. The serfs were forced to attend the spectacle, that it might serve as an example to them. The culprit was the general's barber, as we have said, and the executioner was merely the coachman, who, being used to the handling of a whip, was raised or degraded, which you will, to the office of executioner every time punishment with the knout was ordered. This duty did not deprive him of either the esteem or even the friendship of his comrades, for they well knew that it was his arm alone that punished them and that his heart was not in his work. As Ivan's arm as well as the rest of his body was the property of the general, and the latter could do as he pleased with it, no one was astonished that it should be used for this purpose. More than that, correction administered by Ivan was nearly always gentler than that meted out by another; for it often happened that Ivan, who was a good-natured fellow, juggled away one or two strokes of the knout in a dozen, or if he

were forced by those assisting at the punishment to keep a strict calculation, he manoeuvred so that the tip of the lash struck the deal plank on which the culprit was lying, thus taking much of the sting out of the stroke. Accordingly, when it was Ivan's turn to be stretched upon the fatal plank and to receive the correction he was in the habit of administering, on his own account, those who momentarily played his part as executioner adopted the same expedients, remembering only the strokes spared and not the strokes received. This exchange of mutual benefits, therefore, was productive of an excellent understanding between Ivan and his comrades, which was never so firmly knit as at the moment when a fresh execution was about to take place. It is true that the first hour after the punishment was generally so full of suffering that the knouted was sometimes unjust to the knouter, but this feeling seldom out-lasting the evening, and it was rare when it held out after the first glass of spirits that the operator drank to the health of his patient.

The serf upon whom Ivan was about to exercise his dexterity was a man of five or six-and-thirty, red of hair and beard, a little above average height. His Greek origin might be traced in his countenance, which even in its expression of terror had preserved its habitual characteristics of craft and cunning.

When he arrived at the spot where the punishment was to take place, the culprit stopped and looked up at the window which had already claimed the young aide-de-camp's attention; it still remained shut. With a glance round the throng which

obstructed the entrance leading to the street, he ended by gazing, with a horror-stricken shudder upon the plank on which he was to be stretched. The shudder did not escape his friend Ivan, who, approaching to remove the striped shirt that covered his shoulders, took the opportunity to whisper under his breath —

“Come, Gregory, take courage!”

“You remember your promise?” replied the culprit, with an indefinable expression of entreaty.

“Not for the first lashes, Gregory; do not count on that, for during the first strokes the aide-de-camp will be watching; but among the later ones be assured I will find means of cheating him of some of them.”

“Beyond everything you will take care of the tip of the lash?”

“I will do my best, Gregory, I will do my best. Do you not know that I will?”

“Alas! yes,” replied Gregory.

“Now, then!” said the aide-de-camp.

“We are ready, noble sir,” replied Ivan.

“Wait, wait one moment, your high origin,” cried poor Gregory, addressing the young captain as though he had been a colonel, “Vache Vousso Korodie,” in order to flatter him. “I believe that the lady Vaninka’s window is about to open!”

The young captain glanced eagerly towards the spot which had already several times claimed his attention, but not a fold of the silken curtains, which could be seen through the panes of the window, had moved.

“You are mistaken, you rascal,” said the aide-de-camp, unwillingly removing his eyes from the window, as though he also had hoped to see it open, “you are mistaken; and besides, what has your noble mistress to do with all this?”

“Pardon, your excellency,” continued Gregory, gratifying the aide-de-camp with yet higher rank, – “pardon, but it is through her orders I am about to suffer. Perhaps she might have pity upon a wretched servant!”

“Enough, enough; let us proceed,” said the captain in an odd voice, as though he regretted as well as the culprit that Vaninka had not shown mercy.

“Immediately, immediately, noble sir,” said Ivan; then turning to Gregory, he continued, “Come, comrade; the time has come.”

Gregory sighed heavily, threw a last look up at the window, and seeing that everything remained the same there, he mustered up resolution enough to lie down on the fatal plank. At the same time two other serfs, chosen by Ivan for assistants, took him by the arms and attached his wrists to two stakes, one at either side of him, so that it appeared as though he were stretched on a cross. Then they clamped his neck into an iron collar, and seeing that all was in readiness and that no sign favourable to the culprit had been made from the still closely shut window, the young aide-de-camp beckoned with his hand, saying, “Now, then, begin!”

“Patience, my lord, patience,” said Ivan, still delaying the whipping, in the hope that some sign might yet be made from the inexorable window. “I have a knot in my knout, and if I leave it

Gregory will have good right to complain.”

The instrument with which the executioner was busying himself, and which is perhaps unknown to our readers, was a species of whip, with a handle about two feet long. A plaited leather thong, about four feet long and two inches broad, was attached to this handle, this thong terminating in an iron or copper ring, and to this another band of leather was fastened, two feet long, and at the beginning about one and a half inches thick: this gradually became thinner, till it ended in a point. The thong was steeped in milk and then dried in the sun, and on account of this method of preparation its edge became as keen and cutting as a knife; further, the thong was generally changed at every sixth stroke, because contact with blood softened it.

However unwillingly and clumsily Ivan set about untying the knot, it had to come undone at last. Besides, the bystanders were beginning to grumble, and their muttering disturbed the reverie into which the young aide-de-camp had fallen. He raised his head, which had been sunk on his breast, and cast a last look towards the window; then with a peremptory sign; and in a voice which admitted of no delay, he ordered the execution to proceed.

Nothing could put it off any longer: Ivan was obliged to obey, and he did not attempt to find any new pretext for delay. He drew back two paces, and with a spring he returned to his place, and standing on tiptoe, he whirled the knout above his head, and then letting it suddenly fall, he struck Gregory with such dexterity that the lash wrapped itself thrice round his victim's

body, encircling him like a serpent, but the tip of the thong struck the plank upon which Gregory was lying. Nevertheless, in spite of this precaution, Gregory uttered a loud shriek, and Ivan counted "One."

At the shriek, the young aide-de-camp again turned towards the window; but it was still shut, and mechanically his eyes went back to the culprit, and he repeated the word "One."

The knout had traced three blue furrows on Gregory's shoulders. Ivan took another spring, and with the same skill as before he again enveloped the culprit's body with the hissing thong, ever taking care that the tip of it should not touch him. Gregory uttered another shriek, and Ivan counted "Two." The blood now began to colour the skin.

At the third stroke several drops of blood appeared; at the fourth the blood spurted out; at the fifth some drops spattered the young officer's face; he drew back, and wiped them away with his handkerchief. Ivan profited by his distraction, and counted seven instead of six: the captain took no notice. At the ninth stroke Ivan stopped to change the lash, and in the hope that a second fraud might pass off as luckily as the first, he counted eleven instead of ten.

At that moment a window opposite to Vaninka's opened, and a man about forty-five or fifty in general's uniform appeared. He called out in a careless tone, "Enough, that will do," and closed the window again.

Immediately on this apparition the young aide-de-camp had

turned towards his general, saluting, and during the few seconds that the general was present he remained motionless. When the window had been shut again, he repeated the general's words, so that the raised whip fell without touching the culprit.

"Thank his excellency, Gregory," said Ivan, rolling the knout's lash round his hand, "for having spared you two strokes;" and he added, bending down to liberate Gregory's hand, "these two with the two I was able to miss out make a total of eight strokes instead of twelve. Come, now, you others, untie his other hand."

But poor Gregory was in no state to thank anybody; nearly swooning with pain, he could scarcely stand.

Two moujiks took him by the arms and led him towards the serfs' quarters, followed by Ivan. Having reached the door, however, Gregory stopped, turned his head, and seeing the aide-de-camp gazing pitifully at him, "Oh sir," he cried, "please thank his excellency the general for me. As for the lady Vaninka," he added in a low tone, "I will certainly thank her myself."

"What are you muttering between your teeth?" cried the young officer, with an angry movement; for he thought he had detected a threatening tone in Gregory's voice.

"Nothing, sir, nothing," said Ivan. "The poor fellow is merely thanking you, Mr. Foedor, for the trouble you have taken in being present at his punishment, and he says that he has been much honoured, that is all."

"That is right," said the young man, suspecting that Ivan had somewhat altered the original remarks, but evidently not wishing

to be better informed. "If Gregory wishes to spare me this trouble another time, let him drink less vodka; or else, if he must get drunk, let him at least remember to be more respectful."

Ivan bowed low and followed his comrades, Foedor entered the house again, and the crowd dispersed, much dissatisfied that Ivan's trickery and the general's generosity had deprived them of four strokes of the knout – exactly a third of the punishment.

Now that we have introduced our readers to some of the characters in this history, we must make them better acquainted with those who have made their appearance, and must introduce those who are still behind the curtain.

General Count Tchermayloff, as we have said, after having been governor of one of the most important towns in the environs of Pultava, had been recalled to St. Petersburg by the Emperor Paul, who honoured him with his particular friendship. The general was a widower, with one daughter, who had inherited her mother's fortune, beauty, and pride. Vaninka's mother claimed descent from one of the chieftains of the Tartar race, who had invaded Russia, under the leadership of D'Gengis, in the thirteenth century. Vaninka's naturally haughty disposition had been fostered by the education she had received. His wife being dead, and not having time to look after his daughter's education himself, General Tchermayloff had procured an English governess for her. This lady, instead of suppressing her pupil's scornful propensities, had encouraged them, by filling her head with those aristocratic ideas which have made the English

aristocracy the proudest in the world. Amongst the different studies to which Vaninka devoted herself, there was one in which she was specially interested, and that one was, if one may so call it, the science of her own rank. She knew exactly the relative degree of nobility and power of all the Russian noble families – those that were a grade above her own, and those of whom she took precedence. She could give each person the title which belonged to their respective rank, no easy thing to do in Russia, and she had the greatest contempt for all those who were below the rank of excellency. As for serfs and slaves, for her they did not exist: they were mere bearded animals, far below her horse or her dog in the sentiments which they inspired in her; and she would not for one instant have weighed the life of a serf against either of those interesting animals.

Like all the women of distinction in her nation, Vaninka was a good musician, and spoke French, Italian, German, and English equally well.

Her features had developed in harmony with her character. Vaninka was beautiful, but her beauty was perhaps a little too decided. Her large black eyes, straight nose, and lips curling scornfully at the corners, impressed those who saw her for the first time somewhat unpleasantly. This impression soon wore off with her superiors and equals, to whom she became merely an ordinary charming woman, whilst to subalterns and such like she remained haughty and inaccessible as a goddess. At seventeen Vaninka's education was finished, and her governess who had

suffered in health through the severe climate of St. Petersburg, requested permission to leave. This desire was granted with the ostentatious recognition of which the Russian nobility are the last representatives in Europe. Thus Vaninka was left alone, with nothing but her father's blind adoration to direct her. She was his only daughter, as we have mentioned, and he thought her absolutely perfect.

Things were in this state in the-general's house when he received a letter, written on the deathbed of one of the friends of his youth. Count Romayloff had been exiled to his estates, as a result of some quarrel with Potemkin, and his career had been spoilt. Not being able to recover his forfeited position, he had settled down about four hundred leagues from St. Petersburg; broken-hearted, distressed probably less on account of his own exile and misfortune than of the prospects of his only son, Foedor. The count feeling that he was leaving this son alone and friendless in the world, commended the young man, in the name of their early friendship, to the general, hoping that, owing to his being a favourite with Paul I, he would be able to procure a lieutenancy in a regiment for him. The general immediately replied to the count that his son should find a second father in himself; but when this comforting message arrived, Romayloff was no more, and Foedor himself received the letter and carried it back with him to the general, when he went to tell him of his loss and to claim the promised protection. So great was the general's despatch, that Paul I, at his request, granted the young

man a sub-lieutenancy in the Semonowskoi regiment, so that Foedor entered on his duties the very next day after his arrival in St. Petersburg.

Although the young man had only passed through the general's house on his way to the barracks, which were situated in the Litenoi quarter, he had remained there long enough for him to have seen Vaninka, and she had produced a great impression upon him. Foedor had arrived with his heart full of primitive and noble feelings; his gratitude to his protector, who had opened a career for him, was profound, and extended to all his family. These feelings caused him perhaps to have an exaggerated idea of the beauty of the young girl who was presented to him as a sister, and who, in spite of this title, received him with the frigidity and hauteur of a queen. Nevertheless, her appearance, in spite of her cool and freezing manner, had left a lasting impression upon the young man's heart, and his arrival in St. Petersburg had been marked by feelings till then never experienced before in his life.

As for Vaninka, she had hardly noticed Foedor; for what was a young sub-lieutenant, without fortune or prospects, to her? What she dreamed of was some princely alliance, that would make her one of the most powerful ladies in Russia, and unless he could realise some dream of the Arabian Nights, Foedor could not offer her such a future.

Some time after this first interview, Foedor came to take leave of the general. His regiment was to form part of a contingent that Field-Marshal Souvarow was taking to Italy, and Foedor was

about to die, or show himself worthy of the noble patron who had helped him to a career.

This time, whether on account of the elegant uniform that heightened Foedor's natural good looks, or because his imminent departure, glowing with hope and enthusiasm, lent a romantic interest to the young man, Vaninka was astonished at the marvellous change in him, and deigned, at her father's request, to give him her hand when he left. This was more than Foedor had dared to hope. He dropped upon his knee, as though in the presence of a queen, and took Vaninka's between his own trembling hands, scarcely daring to touch it with his lips. Light though the kiss had been, Vaninka started as though she had been burnt; she felt a thrill run through her, and she blushed violently. She withdrew her hand so quickly, that Foedor, fearing this adieu, respectful though it was, had offended her, remained on his knees, and clasping his hands, raised his eyes with such an expression of fear in them, that Vaninka, forgetting her hauteur, reassured him with a smile. Foedor rose, his heart filled with inexplicable joy, and without being able to say what had caused this feeling, he only knew that it had made him absolutely happy, so that, although he was just about to leave Vaninka, he had never felt greater happiness in his life.

The young man left dreaming golden dreams; for his future, be it gloomy or bright, was to be envied. If it ended in a soldier's grave, he believed he had seen in Vaninka's eyes that she would mourn him; if his future was glorious, glory would bring him

back to St. Petersburg in triumph, and glory is a queen, who works miracles for her favourites.

The army to which the young officer belonged crossed Germany, descended into Italy by the Tyrolese mountains, and entered Verona on the 14th of April 1799. Souvarow immediately joined forces with General Melas, and took command of the two armies. General Chasteler next day suggested that they should reconnoitre. Souvarow, gazing at him with astonishment, replied, "I know of no other way of reconnoitring the enemy than by marching upon him and giving him battle."

As a matter of fact Souvarow was accustomed to this expeditious sort of strategy: through it he had defeated the Turks at Folkschany and Ismailoff; and he had defeated the Poles, after a few days' campaign, and had taken Prague in less than four hours. Catherine, out of gratitude, had sent her victorious general a wreath of oak-leaves, intertwined with precious stones, and worth six hundred thousand roubles, a heavy gold field-marshal's baton encrusted with diamonds; and had created him a field-marshal, with the right of choosing a regiment that should bear his name from that time forward. Besides, when he returned to Russia, she gave him leave of absence, that he might take a holiday at a beautiful estate she had given him, together with the eight thousand serfs who lived upon it.

What a splendid example for Foedor! Souvarow, the son of a humble Russian officer, had been educated at the ordinary

cadets' training college, and had left it as a sub-lieutenant like himself. Why should there not be two Souvarows in the same century?

Souvarow arrived in Italy preceded by an immense reputation; religious, strenuous, unwearied, impassible, loving with the simplicity of a Tartar and fighting with the fury of a Cossack, he was just the man required to continue General Melas's successes over the soldiers of the Republic, discouraged as they had been by the weak vacillations of Scherer.

The Austro-Russian army of one hundred thousand men was opposed by only twenty-nine or thirty thousand French. Souvarow began as usual with a thundering blow. On 20th April he appeared before Brescia, which made a vain attempt at resistance; after a cannonade of about half an hour's duration, the Preschiera gate was forced, and the Korsakow division, of which Foedor's regiment formed the vanguard, charged into the town, pursuing the garrison, which only consisted of twelve hundred men, and obliged them to take refuge in the citadel. Pressed with an impetuosity the French were not accustomed to find in their enemies, and seeing that the scaling ladders were already in position against the ramparts, the captain Boucret wished to come to terms; but his position was too precarious for him to obtain any conditions from his savage conquerors, and he and his soldiers were made prisoners of war.

Souvarow was experienced enough to know how best to profit by victory; hardly master of Brescia, the rapid occupation of

which had discouraged our army anew, he ordered General Kray to vigorously press on the siege of Preschiera. General Kray therefore established his headquarters at Valeggio, a place situated at an equal distance between Preschiera and Mantua, and he extended from the Po to the lake of Garda, on the banks of the Mencio, thus investing the two cities at the same time.

Meanwhile the commander-in-chief had advanced, accompanied by the larger part of his forces, and had crossed the Oglio in two columns: he launched one column, under General Rosenberg, towards Bergamo, and the other, with General Melas in charge, towards the Serio, whilst a body of seven or eight thousand men, commanded by General Kaim and General Hohenzollern, were directed towards Placentia and Cremona, thus occupying the whole of the left bank of the Po, in such a manner that the Austro-Russian army advanced deploying eighty thousand men along a front of forty-five miles.

In view of the forces which were advancing, and which were three times as large as his own, Scherer beat a retreat all along the line. He destroyed the bridges over the Adda, as he did not consider that he was strong enough to hold them, and, having removed his headquarters to Milan, he awaited there the reply to a despatch which he had sent to the Directory, in which, tacitly acknowledging his incapacity, he tendered his resignation. As the arrival of his successor was delayed, and as Souvarow continued to advance, Scherer, more and more terrified by the responsibility which rested upon him, relinquished his command

into the hands of his most able lieutenant. The general chosen by him was Moreau, who was again about to fight those Russians in whose ranks he was destined to die at last.

Moreau's unexpected nomination was proclaimed amidst the acclamation of the soldiers. He had been called the French Fabius, on account of his magnificent campaign on the Rhine. He passed his whole army in review, saluted by the successive acclamations of its different divisions, which cried, "Long live Moreau! Long live the saviour of the army of Italy!" But however great this enthusiasm, it did not blind Moreau to the terrible position in which he found himself. At the risk of being outflanked, it was necessary for him to present a parallel line to that of the Russian army, so that, in order to face his enemy, he was obliged to extend his line from Lake Lecco to Pizzighitone – that is to say, a distance of fifty miles. It is true that he might have retired towards Piedmont and concentrated his troops at Alexandria, to await there the reinforcements the Directory had promised to send him. But if he had done this, he would have compromised the safety of the army at Naples, and have abandoned it, isolated as it was, to the mercy of the enemy. He therefore resolved to defend the passage of the Adda as long as possible, in order to give the division under Dessolles, which was to be despatched to him by Massena, time to join forces with him and to defend his left, whilst Gauthier, who had received orders to evacuate Tuscany and to hasten with forced marches to his aid, should have time to arrive and protect his

right. Moreau himself took the centre, and personally defended the fortified bridge of Cassano; this bridge was protected by the Ritorto Canal, and he also defended it with a great deal of artillery and an entrenched vanguard. Besides, Moreau, always as prudent as brave, took every precaution to secure a retreat, in case of disaster, towards the Apennines and the coast of Genoa. Hardly were his dispositions completed before the indefatigable Souvarow entered Triveglia. At the same time as the Russian commander-in-chief arrived at this last town, Moreau heard of the surrender of Bergamo and its castle, and on 23rd April he saw the heads of the columns of the allied army.

The same day the Russian general divided his troops into three strong columns, corresponding to the three principal points in the French line, each column numerically more than double the strength of those to whom they were opposed. The right column, led by General Wukassowich, advanced towards Lake Lecco, where General Serrurier awaited it. The left column, under the command of Melas, took up its position in front of the Cassano entrenchments; and the Austrian division, under Generals Zopf and Ott, which formed the centre, concentrated at Canonia, ready at a given moment to seize Vaprio. The Russian and Austrian troops bivouacked within cannon-shot of the French outposts.

That evening, Foedor, who with his regiment formed part of Chasteler's division, wrote to General Tchermayloff:

“We are at last opposite the French, and a great battle must take place to-morrow morning; tomorrow evening I shall be a

lieutenant or a corpse.”

Next morning, 26th April, cannon resounded at break of day from the extremities of the lines; on our left Prince Bagration’s grenadiers attacked us, on our right General Seckendorff, who had been detached from the camp of Triveglia, was marching on Crema.

These two attacks met with very different success. Bagration’s grenadiers were repulsed with terrible loss, whilst Seckendorff, on the contrary, drove the French out of Crema, and pushed forward towards the bridge of Lodi. Foedor’s predictions were falsified: his portion of the army did nothing the whole day; his regiment remained motionless, waiting for orders that did not come.

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