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# Our Little Cossack Cousin in Siberia



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# F. A. Postnikov

## Our Little Cossack Cousin in Siberia

### PREFACE

The name Cossacks is given to a large part of the Russian population. These people are endowed with special privileges in return for specific military service. They are of different racial origin. There are ten separate *voiskos*, settled along the frontiers, those of the Don, Kuban, Terek, Astrakan, Ural, Orenburg, Siberian, Semir-yechensk, Amur, and Ussuri. These differ in many respects, though with a similar military organization, the primary unit of which is the *stanitsa* or administrative village.

The historical Cossacks are those of the Don and of the Dnieper Rivers in Russia, of whom it has been said that they were "originally passionate lovers of freedom who went forth to find it in the wilderness." The other Cossack divisions have been patterned after these by the Government. In the later sections the military spirit and the old Cossack traditions are carefully fostered.

Our book deals with the Ussuri Cossacks of Siberia, among whom Colonel Postnikov lived for many years, both as an officer and as a civil engineer. Although the story is written in the first person, it is in no sense an autobiography of the author, who was born in western Russia.

Besides the country around Ussuri River, other sections of Siberia and other classes of people than the Cossacks are described incidentally.

In the spelling of Russian names, an endeavor has been made to give some idea of the actual pronunciation.

*The Editor.*

## CHAPTER I

### CHILDHOOD ADVENTURE

No, indeed, we don't sleep through our Siberian winters, nor do we coddle ourselves hanging around a fire, – not we Cossack<sup>1</sup> children.

I was brought up in Eastern Siberia, in a Russian settlement, on the Ussuri River, about fifty or sixty miles from where it joins the Amur. These settlements, you ought to know, were first established in the year 1857, in order to show the neighboring Manchus where Russian boundaries ended. The first were along the Amur, the later along the Ussuri River. No doubt I owe much of my hardiness to the fact that my ancestors were among the involuntary pioneers sent here by our government.<sup>2</sup>

The source of the Ussuri is so far south that in the early spring there is always danger of a sudden breaking of the ice near its mouth and a consequent overflow. Now it is strange, but whenever we children were forbidden to go on the river something would tempt us to do it.

"You mustn't go on the ice, Vanka," father said to me one day as he left for Habarovsk, the nearest big city.

I remembered the command all right until I met my chum Peter. He had a fine new sled to show me. It could go so swiftly that when he proposed that we cross to the Manchurian side, I said quite readily, "Whee! That'll be grand; it isn't far, and we can get back in no time!"

Peter was on the sled which I was pulling, when we neared the low Chinese banks of the forbidden river. They were not as near as they had seemed. It had taken us a full half hour to cross, although we ran all the way, taking turns on the sled. Suddenly Peter called out in a strange tone of voice: "Stop, Vanka, stop! We must run. Look! Hongoose!"<sup>3</sup>

I stopped so suddenly as almost to throw Peter off of the sled, and saw three Manchurians on the bank. They were standing near their horses who had huge bundles slung across their backs.

"Why," I said slowly, resolved not to be frightened, "those are merchants."

"No," said Peter, his lips trembling; "they have rifles."

"Ye-es," I reluctantly admitted; "but see their big bundles. They are certainly traders."

"We had better run – " began Peter stubbornly, turning from me.

"You're nothing but a *baba* (old woman)," I said contemptuously, a tingle of shame covering my cheeks at the mere thought of me, a Cossack boy, running from a Chinaman. What would my father say, or my grandfather? Whoever heard of their doing such a thing? Yet, to my great surprise, my knees trembled as I recalled a scene of two years ago, when the brave Cossack Kontuska was found two miles from our village with his head smashed open, and it had been decided that he had been murdered by the Hongoose. Then, with a certain feeling of being protected, there also flashed through my mind a picture of the revenge expedition that the Cossacks had organized, and even of the Chinese horse that had been brought later, as one of the spoils, to my own home.

As we stood thus, one of the Manchus suddenly threw the bundles from off his horse, and, leaping on it, rode at full gallop towards us. I caught my breath, yet instinctively picked up a huge piece of ice, while Peter raised the sled into the air with both his hands.

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<sup>1</sup> More properly Kozak or Kazak.

<sup>2</sup> In the spring of 1857, a regiment of three sotnias of Cossacks from the Transbaikal region were chosen by lot to settle with their families along the Amur River. Here they were divided into small villages or stanitsas (Cossack posts) about fifteen miles apart. The land was then for the most part a wilderness. There were forests to be cleared and marshes to be drained. In addition to doing this pioneer work the Cossacks had to defend the frontier toward China and provide postal communications between the Amur and the section from which they had come. – The Editor.

<sup>3</sup> Members of organized bands of Chinese robbers.

It was a regular Siberian winter morning, dry and clear. The sun was still in the east over the high Russian bank, so that it fell full on the approaching Chinaman, as we called him. The snow flew out like sparks of fire from under the hoofs of his horse, accompanied by a peculiar crunching sound. When a few hundred feet from us, the Manchurian changed the gallop to an easy trot.

"*How a ma?*"<sup>4</sup> he said, when he had come up, surveying us with a broad smile.

With a deep feeling of relief something made me recognize the fact that he had not come to slay but merely to satisfy his curiosity. I noticed the round red circular spot on his breast as well as the red ball on his cap. These, I knew, indicated that he was a regular army officer. With an awkward show of friendship he turned us round and round, touching our clothes, looking inside of our hats, and then said something which puzzled us. But when he had twice repeated, "*Shango-shango*," I understood that it meant that all was right, but whether it related to our clothes or to us, I hadn't any idea.

To show that I wasn't afraid, I shook my fist at him saying, "You are *bushango*."<sup>5</sup>

He understood, and smiling good-naturedly said in broken Russian: "No, no, me shango too." Then, opening his fur coat and putting one hand under it, he pulled out something wrapped in a small piece of rice paper. This he opened. It contained a few cookies smelling of peanut oil, and these he smilingly offered to us.

I leaned heavily first on one foot, then on the other, while Peter looked sideways, unable to decide whether it would be proper to accept such a gift from a Chinaman or not; but tempted by a desire to show it to our parents, we took it shyly. "How interested mother will be," I thought, quite forgetful of my disobedience. Mother, however, never got a glimpse of the treat; every crumb was eaten long before we got half way back.

When I reached home, I found mother in a very nervous state of mind. Some one had spread the report of our trip across the border, and in her anxiety she imagined all sorts of terrible things to be happening to us.

No sooner did she see me than she put down my baby sister, who had fallen asleep in her arms, and embraced me. A moment after she still further relieved her wrought up feelings by giving me a sound whipping, and still later, after I had washed myself and had had my dinner, both she and my older sister listened with many questions to very minute particulars of our little adventure.

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<sup>4</sup> Northern Chinese for "Hello."

<sup>5</sup> Not good.

## CHAPTER II

### THE FIRST DEER OF THE SEASON

It was April. Winter was over, but the sun had not yet had time to melt the ice in our part of the river when the alarm was given that the Ussuri had broken loose a hundred miles above us and was rushing toward our village at tremendous speed.

This news was brought by an officer who had been sent to give orders that the river be dynamited at once to remove the ice blockade.

I was awakened that night by a terrible noise resembling hundreds of guns shot in rapid succession. My first impression was that the officer and his assistants were blowing up the ice, but I soon learned differently.

When I had dressed and come out, I could see that it was caused entirely by the breaking of the ice. All the village, including babes in arms, were already on the banks. It was not light enough to see the whole picture, but in the half darkness the moving white field of ice blocks resembled now a herd of mysterious animals, fighting among themselves, jumping on one another, and roaring, as they rushed headlong toward the north, or then again more like spirits driven from paradise, and making their way into the unknown with cries and wails, in desperate panic and fear.

We stood there for two or three hours watching the ice blocks, many of them three or four feet thick and hundreds of feet long, pushed out on the shore by their neighbors, to be in their turn broken by new masses of blocks. When the sun arose the picture instead of mysterious became magnificent. As far as one could see there was a moving field of blocks of ice, gleaming in rainbow colors, apparently changing shapes at every moment. Those nearest to us rushed with the greatest velocity, the middle blocks moved more slowly, and those toward the low Chinese shore seemed merely a moving stretch of snow.

I had just noted that the river which I was accustomed to see far below our high bank, now almost rose to its level, when I heard quick, excited exclamations around me: "Deer! Deer!"

I turned to where the hands were pointing and saw a strange sight. Several of the small deer that we Siberians called *koza*, were sailing on a big block of ice in the middle of the stream. A moment after every person was in motion, even the women running home for rifles. I remained with only a few old men who muttered: "The fools! How could they get them so far away, even if they should happen to shoot them?"

But the hunter instinct, or perhaps the strong desire to get this particular kind of food, made every one reject the apparent impossibility of getting the booty from this terrible roaring river, carrying everything so swiftly away.

The animals approached nearer and nearer. We could see their occasional desperate efforts to jump from one block to another, always to return to the big block which quietly and majestically flowed among hundreds of smaller ones, which pushed around it, now breaking their edges, now leaving a part of themselves on its surface.

In a short time the deer were directly opposite us. There were five of them, a big stag and four does.

Suddenly there was a rapid succession of shots around me from the men who had returned. The stag fell, killed, I afterwards learned, by my uncle who had aimed at it as being the most precious. Two of the does also fell, but the two remaining started on a wild race for the Chinese shore. One of them was obviously wounded, for after two or three slow bounds she was caught by the moving mass of ice and disappeared under the water. I followed the other with a certain amount of sympathy until it was nothing but a tiny dot, and then turned my attention to what was going on around me.

There was great excitement. An old Cossack named Skorin, was trying to stop his nineteen-year-old son and two others from the mad attempt to push a boat on to the stream, in order to go after the slain animals. These had been pushed gradually nearer us by the ice, and Young Skorin argued that it would be easy to get them.

I noticed that this dispute was being listened to by our friend Che-un, a member of the Goldi tribe, one of the native Siberian races, who had lived near our village as far back as I could remember. He was regarded with considerable kindly respect by the Cossacks as being the most experienced hunter and fisher among them. He had on, as usual, his winter costume which made him look like a bundle of fur. It consisted of a nicely made deerskin coat, deerskin trousers and boots. His dark face, with its flat nose, its sparkling, black, almond-shaped eyes, was all attention.

Old Skorin turned to him. "Tell this madman," he said, "that it is certain death to try to get into the stream now."

Without giving him a chance to reply, Young Skorin burst out: "Say, Che-un, tell father how I crossed during last year's flood."

The Goldi did not answer at once. Instead, he puffed two or three times through the long pipe which he always held in his mouth. Then, slowly pulling it out, he said brokenly, "Were it a bear, I might go – but for deer – no."

"Oh, come on," said Young Skorin persuasively. "If you won't, I'll go with Vassili here. Come on, Vassili," and, with a reckless laugh, and without paying further heed to the protests of his father, he made a bound to his boat which was lying among others on the snowy bank.

All of these boats were of the light Goldi type, built from three very wide boards, one about two feet wide, at the bottom, the two others on the sides, and two small end boards, all well-seasoned, nailed, and caulked, bent to meet and generally raised at the bow. All the boards were well smeared over with tar. Such a boat can be easily carried by two men, or pushed along the snow or ice. At the same time its displacement is so great that five and sometimes six men can cross a stream in it.

When the two young men had pushed the boat over the snow into the river, Young Skorin took his seat in it while Vassili ran for two landing forks, a gun, and one oar. When he returned, Che-un suddenly changed his mind and joined the daring youths. This gave great relief to all of the women, who were filled with anxiety as to the outcome of the boys' crazy venture.

## CHAPTER III

### THE BOOTY SECURED

The boat was soon on the river, partly on ice and partly in water, and the struggle to reach the big ice block on which the deer lay, began. We saw the hooks of the young men flying now to the left, now to the right of the boat. Sometimes one end of the boat, sometimes the other, would be raised high into the air. Now and then, as the stream carried them further away, we could distinguish that it had become necessary for the youths to pull or push the boat across some ice barrier. As we strained our eyes watching them, it seemed to all of us that they could never reach their goal.

Noontime came, and I heard my mother's call to dinner. I was so hungry by that time, not having breakfasted, that I answered at once despite my desire to see the end of the adventure.

I had scarcely seated myself at the table when my father and Old Skorin entered.

"You must eat with us, Pavel Ivanovich,"<sup>6</sup> said my father. "You can't go home. It's too far. Besides, it's a long time since we've had a chance to be together."

We all understood father's kind intention of trying to keep the old man's mind from dwelling too anxiously on his son's uncertain fate. Besides, my older sister had just become engaged to Young Skorin and this drew our families closer together.

Old Skorin stepped into the room with dignity, took off his fur cap, and walking to the corner in which hung the ikon,<sup>7</sup> crossed himself. Not until he had done this, did he salute my mother with: "Bread and salt, Anna Feodorovna," this being the customary greeting when any one is invited for a meal.

"You are welcome, dear guest, Pavel Ivanovitch," was my mother's hearty response. "Take this seat," and she pointed to the place of honor under the ikon and to the right of my father.

"Where is Katia?" asked Skorin.

At this question I looked around amazed to find that Katia was not in the room. I had never before known her to be absent at meal time.

Mother answered with a trace of discontent in her voice: "I don't know. The breaking up of the ice seems to have upset the whole village. Run, Vanka, and find her."

I left my place at the table with great reluctance, not daring to offer any protest in the presence of my father, whose military training made him insist on prompt obedience.

When I reached the river's bank, I saw my sister among those yet there. She stood shading her eyes, in order to still make out the now scarcely visible boat. Her face expressed a peculiar mixture of admiration and anxiety. I recalled that she had had a quarrel with Young Skorin the night before, which had probably led to the rash undertaking. Inexperienced though I was in such matters, I felt that this venture had somehow resulted in her complete forgiveness.

When she understood why I had come, her first question was, "Is father already home?" Learning that he was, she ran as fast as if her heels were on fire, so that I could scarcely keep up with her.

When we reached home the talk turned to the appearance of the *koza*, my father saying that it was a good omen, that we should have plenty of deer meat that season.

These Siberian deer always move in a succession of small herds, and are followed and preyed on not only by men but also by wolves and other animals. For this reason our cattle were always safe

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<sup>6</sup> In social converse in Russia, the given name of the person addressed and the given name of the person's father are used together, instead of a title and the surname as with us. Thus, Mr. John Smith, the son of Mr. Karl Smith, would be addressed as John Karl-ovitch. – The Editor.

<sup>7</sup> The picture of the Savior, the Virgin, or some saint. Used in the Russo-Greek Church and found in the home of every member of it. – The Editor.

during their migration. At this time, too, we always had an abundance of deer meat three times a day. The skins were saved either to be immediately made into fur coats and caps or for future use. Often on account of the abundance of these skins many of them were sold to traders who now and then visited our part of the country.

Every boy in our village learned all about the habits of the deer in childhood, not only from his relatives but also from the members of the neighboring Goldi tribes, or from Manchurians who use the growing antlers as an invigorating medicine, considering it almost as precious as ginseng, which is also found along the Ussuri River. Sometimes they paid as high as two or three hundred rubles<sup>8</sup> for a pair. I knew several Cossacks who made a fortune hunting deer. They were also profitable to keep as pets, the horns of the male being cut off every summer, when just about to harden, and sold.

We were just through dinner when a shout came that Young Skorin had been successful. We rushed out and met him bringing the big stag to our house. My mother and sister helped him skin it and cut it into four parts. Then I was sent around to spread the news that that evening there would be a big feast to which the whole village was asked, this to be followed by a dance for the young people.

Toward evening the guests began to arrive, many of the men dressed in old uniforms, many others simply in belted, gayly embroidered red, blue, and gray blouses. The older people seated themselves around the table in our house, while the younger received their share of the feast informally at our nearest neighbor's, greatly relieved at being free for a while from the supervision of their elders.

The meal lasted a long time. There was first the traditional deer soup of the Cossack, then roast deer, and finally an unlimited amount of coarse rye bread, milk, and tea. Vodka, too, as an especial treat, was offered to the older people.

When the table had been cleared and moved out of the way, the blind musician, Foma, with his fiddle under his arm, was led into a corner. The son of the head man of our village (the *ataman*), took his place next to him with a harmonica. The dancing began with the rather slow steps of "*Po Ulice Mastovoi*" (On the paved Street), and ended with the Cossack dance, "*Kazachok*," led by an old woman named Daria, and Old Skorin, followed by more and more active dancers, until it finally terminated in the dancing of the liveliest Cossack present, each newly invented stunt on his part producing an explosion of applause.

During the dance the house was packed with people. The greatest excitement prevailed. Men sober enough in everyday life, seemed suddenly to give expression to something wild in their natures. By midnight every one present was so exhilarated that he was either dancing or beating time. Even Grand-dad Matvei, who was said to be a hundred years old, kept time with the music by shrugging his shoulders and striking his feet against the ground.

All that evening my sister and Young Skorin were the center of attention, their engagement having been announced immediately after supper.

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<sup>8</sup> A ruble is a Russian coin equal to about our half dollar.

## CHAPTER IV

### A BIG CATCH AND NEW PREPARATIONS

One evening, later in the spring, when our rivers were entirely free from ice, and the banks were covered with green grass and primroses, Peter came suddenly into our barnyard with: "Quick! Get your spearing fork! There's fish in the grass."

Without a word, I made several leaps to the barn where my father kept his fishing implements, snatched a fork, and followed Peter in a race to the river.

Just before we reached the bank, Peter grabbed hold of my hand. "Be quiet," he said, softly. "Do you see anything?"

I looked on the slightly waving surface of the river and along the bank, but could see nothing out of the usual.

Peter let me gaze for a while and then pointing to a small inlet formed by a curvature of the river, where the water was very shallow and gradually sloped toward the meadow, whispered: "There!"

My eyes followed the direction of the pointing finger. The grass of the surrounding meadow was partially under water, only a few inches projecting above the level. Here something attracted my attention. It looked like a brown comb moving gently back and forth. "A fin," I whispered, more to myself than to Peter.

Hardly breathing, we stepped into the water which reached to our knees, and made our way toward the brown waving comb of the fish. I held the fork in readiness and tried to keep between the fish and the river.

When we were about three or four steps from the fish, it suddenly threw itself in our direction, and so swiftly that I had scarcely time to throw the spear. Then something struck me on the foot and I fell forward into the water.

"Hurry," screamed Peter. "Help me."

With my face in mud and water, I could not at first understand the situation. When I arose, however, and had wiped my eyes, I was mad with excitement and joy. The fish had not reached the stream but was on the sandy bank, half under water. Peter was pressing his whole body on it, trying to hold it down. It was a *sazan*, extremely big, weighing at least fifteen pounds, and it took us more than five minutes to subdue it and carry it to a dry spot. When this was done I let Peter hold the fish with his fork while I ran for a sack. In this we carried the fish home, immensely proud and boastful of our achievement.

When father returned at night, he expressed surprise at the size of our catch, adding that he had heard that day that the *keta* were expected soon. This produced more excitement, for next to bread the most important food of the Ussuri Cossack is fish, and particularly the *keta*, a kind of salmon.

When the *keta* came from the sea at Nikolaievsk, they are very fat but get thinner as they go up stream, it taking several weeks to make the journey from the mouth of the river to the source. The Cossacks have to be very active during the migration, for it lasts only a few days.

But father had still other news for us which brought the excitement to a climax. He had asked the commander of my brother's garrison to permit Dimitri to return home to help with the *keta* fishing!

The day following our big catch, all of the men of our village set to work patching nets, sharpening their spearing forks, repairing their boats, while the women cleaned and got ready all the different necessary vessels from barrels to frying pans. Father had brought as much salt from the town as possible, but it would only be sufficient for pickling a part of the fish; the rest would have to be smoked and dried.

While all the village were thus engaged, two horsemen were seen approaching. They wore tall fur hats, had swords at their sides, and guns over their shoulders. Their yellow shoulder straps and the

broad yellow stripes on their wide trousers which were shoved into high boots, the silver inlaid handles of their *nagaikas* (Cossack whips), all indicated that they belonged to one of the active divisions of the Ussuri Cossacks.

Surprised exclamations of "Mitya!" "Phillip!" "Brother!" "Son!" were heard. I waved a red handkerchief at them, recognizing Dimitri's companion as Phillip, a cousin of my chum Peter. When they reached the village, they leaped lightly from their horses and kissed and embraced all present, answering as they did so the questions and joshing remarks hurled at them.

I learned that they had come on a two weeks' leave of absence, and that even father had not expected them so soon. After the first greeting, he said reproachfully: "There was no need for you to hurry so fast. You might have killed the horses. Why, it's only yesterday that I saw you."

"Don't be grouchy, father," said Dimitri. "We walked half of the way. I am very well aware that a Cossack's first duty is to his horse; his second to himself." And as if to demonstrate this, he turned to where I was trying to climb into his saddle and said seriously: "No, Vanka, don't worry him now. He is too tired. Better loosen his saddle girths, take off his bridle, and lead him to the stable. Don't forget to put as much straw as possible under his feet. Don't get on him, or I'll never let you go near him."

Although discouraged in my expectation of a nice ride, I was nevertheless proud of my brother and his confidence, and led the horse to a shed which, as was usual in our village, consisted of three sides only, the fourth, to the South, being open.

At that moment my mother came running up. She had not seen Dimitri for more than a year, and she hung herself on his neck, laughing and weeping with joy.

Then the interrupted work was resumed. Dimitri and Phillip left us to change their clothes, but soon returned and joined heartily in our preparations.

Part of the men now waded out into an arm of the river until the water reached to their breast. Through this arm the fish usually made their way. Here two fences, separated by a space of about two hundred feet, were to be built, one to the Russian bank, the opposite one from the water to an island in the river. First, poles three or four inches thick, were thrust into the river bottom, about a foot apart, and then willow twigs interwoven between. The fences were then braced from behind with posts tied with willow ropes.

When these were finished and the men had come back to shore, a big fire was kindled. Standing around it, they took off their wet clothes and hung them on nearby bushes or spread them out in the sun.

Old Skorin then pulled a basket with eatables from under a stone, and also a bottle containing *vodka* (brandy), in order, he said, to keep them from catching cold while standing around naked after their icy bath. Although their lips were blue and their teeth chattered, they laughed and joked as they took it. People don't complain of things in our part of the world.

A decidedly cold wind now began to blow and I was sent to several of the homes for what clothes I could get. Without, however, waiting for me to return, they began to spread the fish nets which were lying in big bundles on the banks.

I soon came back with some dry things for the oldest in the party. For Skorin, in addition to an old army overcoat, I had a pair of long socks made of heavy wool by his wife. She had pressed them into my hand at the last moment, bidding me to be sure to see that her husband put them on.

Skorin received these with a show of scorn, mingled, however, with a satisfaction that he could not disguise. "My wife," he said, "is always worrying about me. If we Cossacks gave in to our wives, we'd all be very tender-footed." But I saw that he pulled on the socks.

## **Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.**

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