

**THE
FOUNDLING OF
THE WRECK**

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**THE
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CHAPTER I.

A SHIPWRECK.

If our young readers will take a map of Europe, and look to the west, they will see a broad wide sea called the Baltic, stretching northward and separating the countries of Norway and Sweden from Russia. To the east of this sea is a gulf, called the Gulf of Finland, and at the extremity of that gulf, at the mouth of the river Neva, stands the city of St. Petersburg, the capital of Russia in Europe.

St. Petersburg is at the present time a populous and beautiful city. It contains so many splendid buildings, that it is sometimes called a city of palaces, but about the beginning of the eighteenth century (which is a hundred and fifty years ago,) the ground on which it stands was an immense bog, or marsh, surrounded by dreary forests. The only persons who dwelt on the then desolate spot were some fishermen who built a few little cabins near the water's edge; but as the river at certain seasons of the year frequently overflowed its banks, and the cabins were sometimes washed away, even these few little tenements were often deserted.

I dare say most of our young readers have heard or read of Peter the Great, the celebrated Emperor, or Czar of Russia. He built the city of St. Petersburg, and called it after his own name; but of that we shall speak hereafter, at present we have to do with a humble individual, named Michael Kopt, who lived in one of the cabins we have spoken of.

Michael's father was a Swede, and could read and write, and was therefore far in advance of the ignorant Russian serfs, among whom he lived. Having been carried prisoner to Russia, during one of the numerous wars between the Russians and Swedes, he had been compelled to obtain his living as a fisherman. He taught his son Michael all that he had himself learned, and also brought him up to his trade. When Michael became a man, he married a young woman, the daughter of one of the same craft; they were very poor, but they lived happily together, for Margaret was thrifty and affectionate, and Michael steady, sober and industrious. During the fishing season, Michael applied himself very diligently to his business, and with his wife's assistance, dried and salted the greater part of the fish which he caught, then, when the floods were expected, they removed to a village some miles distant, and lived on the produce of their joint labour.

One season Michael and his wife remained in the fishing-hut, a few weeks later than usual, on account of the fineness of the weather, and there being no signs of the floods. However, on the day before that fixed for their departure, a violent storm suddenly arose, and it was evident that the cabins were in danger of being swept away, either by the strong gale which blew from the sea, or by the water. Terrified by the prospect, the two or three fishermen who had been their companions hurried off, even in the midst of the storm, hoping to reach a place of safety, before the floods overtook them; and Michael and Margaret were preparing to follow their example, when they were startled by hearing the firing of guns as from a ship in distress. The fisherman and his wife looked at each other in deep concern, but neither spoke. What could they do to assist the unhappy mariners, and the delay of one hour might be death to themselves.

‘Shall we go Margaret?’ Michael at length broke the silence by saying.

‘Can we help those poor creatures?’ she asked.

‘We cannot do anything to save the ship,’ he replied, ‘but we may perhaps be of some service should any of the people be thrown upon the strand.’

‘Then we will stop awhile, and trust to God’s protecting care,’ she nobly rejoined; and as she spoke, she laid down the little bundle of clothes which she had hastily put together, intending to carry with them.

Michael now ran to the front window of the cottage, with the idea of getting a view of the vessel in distress, but he only reached the spot in time to see her go down. The wind had driven her with violence against a rock, which had made a large opening in her keel, through which the water rushed so fast, that all attempts to check it proved vain, and she sunk almost instantly to the bottom.

‘All are lost!’ exclaimed Margaret, who had followed her husband, and was now standing behind him with her hands clasped together, and her eyes raised toward heaven in an attitude of prayer.

‘Nay, dear Madgy, it is possible that some poor creature may be drifted on the shore,’ cried Michael; ‘I will at all events go and see.’

Margaret’s heart quailed with fear, lest her husband’s life should fall a sacrifice to his humanity; but she could not oppose his generous resolve, so she suffered him to go without a word of remonstrance.

As soon as he left the door, she fell on her knees and prayed that he might be protected in his perilous enterprise.

She arose in a more composed state of mind, and then sat down to await her husband's return. Her patience was not long tried, he came in shortly after, bearing in his arms a wicker-basket bound up in a sheet of oil-cloth. The poor woman's first words were an exclamation of thankfulness for his safe return; she next eagerly inquired what he had brought with him.

'I have brought thee a child, Madgy, what say you to that?' cried the fisherman looking at her with a smile.



‘A child!’ she repeated.

‘Yes, a brave boy. I found him in one of the holes in the rock.’

‘Is he alive?’ asked Margaret, drawing back the oil-cloth that she might get a sight of the babe.

‘Alive, yes; the urchin seemed to be quite enjoying his new home.’

‘Don’t jest, dear Michael,’ cried Margaret; ‘the mother of this poor little creature has most likely found a watery grave.’

‘True, but you will be a mother to him, won’t you?’

‘Aye, that I will,’ responded the kind-hearted woman, catching the child in her arms, and folding him to her bosom. ‘Aye, that I will, Miche, I’ll carry him myself, if you will take the baggage. But is this poor babe the only creature who has escaped?’

‘I have reason to believe so,’ returned the fisherman; ‘but I could not remain longer on the shore, the water flowed in so fast. We must haste now, dear Madgy, or we shall be too late.’

Margaret wanted not a second bidding, but after having hastily wrapped the babe in a bear’s skin, she and her husband quitted the hut.

CHAPTER II.

A JOURNEY AND A WELCOME HOME.

Michael and Margaret had, as our young readers may suppose, a very unpleasant and perilous journey over boggy land, in the midst of a violent storm too. The charge of an infant of three or four months old, of course added to their cares and difficulties; but both the fisherman and his wife had stout hearts which would not soon sink under dangers; and the Russians are naturally a hardy people. Their winter abode was the cottage in which Margaret had spent her childhood and early youth, which was still occupied by her parents, they were therefore sure of a hearty and affectionate welcome when their journey was over. The old people had been very anxious about them, fearing from their long stay, that some evil had overtaken them, so the present meeting was every way delightful.

‘We have brought some live-stock with us, mother,’ said Michael, smiling and looking significantly at his wife’s mother.

‘Live stock,’ repeated the dame, ‘why, what have you got?’

Margaret here took off the bearskin covering and displayed her little charge to view.

‘What, a baby!’ cried the old woman in a tone of amazement.

Wet and weary as the travellers were, it was not a time to keep up a jest, otherwise Michael would have let the old people guess for a while, before he told them in what way the little foundling had been thrown upon their protection, as it was, he explained all in a

sentence, and then begged that they would let him have something to eat.

Margaret felt more disposed for taking rest than for sharing in the meal, so she and her mother retired together into one of the sleeping-rooms, taking the infant with them.

The storm subsided in the course of the night, but no effort could be made to rescue the shipwrecked people, even should any of them have drifted to the shore, for the river had by this time so far overflowed its banks, that the path the fisherman and his wife had so recently trodden, was not now to be seen. As there appeared but little probability that the child would ever be claimed, Michael and his wife resolved on adopting him, and treating him in every respect as if he were their own. The little fellow seemed very well satisfied with his new friends. He smiled and cooed at Margaret, in return for her caresses, and tried to imitate Michael's loud ringing laugh. With Margaret's mother too, he was an especial favourite, and even the old man was much pleased with this addition to their family.

The matter to be decided on next was, what name the little stranger should bear. Margaret was reminded by his wicker-cradle and the perils of his infancy of Moses in his ark of bulrushes, on the banks of the Egyptian river. She could not help thinking, she said, that a *mother's* tender hand had fastened him so securely in his little bed, and that a mother's prayers had saved him from a watery grave, and she proposed that he should be called by the name of Moses. However, when the swaddling-clothes in which he had been found were closely examined, an almost indistinct mark was found on one of them, which after some little difficulty, was discovered to be *Gerald*. It was therefore determined to call him by that name.

CHAPTER III.

A GLANCE AT RUSSIAN HISTORY.

Ten years glided away and very little change took place in the fisherman's family, excepting that the infant foundling grew up, by degrees, into a fine intelligent boy. In the long nights of the Russian winter, unless there is some kind of mental employment, time passes very wearily. Michael had so far profited by his father's instructions, as to be able to impart the elements of useful knowledge to Gerald, who was both an apt and eager scholar. His natural intelligence had thus been quickened, and his thirst for knowledge increased by the humble but useful instructions of his kind foster father. While they used to sit round the large warm stove, when they had read from the Bible or some other of the one or two books, which Michael inherited from his father, Michael would then relate incidents in the history of Sweden, or talk about the great protestant reformers—or the learned men his father had known or heard of at Upsal, his native city. Gerald was never tired of hearing about these things, and the thoughts that came into his mind when Michael talked about the famous university of Upsal, where so many people passed their time in acquiring or imparting knowledge were quite exciting, and he could not help hoping that something or other might occur that would place him in the way of acquiring more knowledge than he was likely to obtain in the hut of a poor fisherman, dearly as he loved his kind benefactors. Gerald was a good and grateful child, and desirous of doing all he could to assist those generous friends who had acted the part of parents to him. Even when quite a little boy, he tried to help his father, as he called him, in his craft. He was very fond too, of his

good mother, as he called Margaret, and you may be sure they loved him very dearly.

Previous to the reign of Peter the great, the Russian empire had been far behind the other nations of Europe in the progress of civilization. Even the highest classes amongst the people were extremely ignorant, very few of them could even read or write, and they spent the principal part of their time in feasting and drinking. They had neither ships, nor sailors, and no manufacturing class of people, except a few of the serfs who worked for the sole benefit of their masters. The fine arts were unknown, and the most useful arts were very imperfectly understood. At that time Peter, shared the throne with his elder brother, Ivan; but Ivan, being only a little above an idiot in mind, was a mere cipher. Peter, on the contrary, was possessed of a powerful intellect and great sagacity, and he had moreover an enterprising spirit. One of his early acts on ascending the throne, was, to send a number of the young nobles of his court into Italy, Germany, and Holland, to gain instruction in military and naval affairs. He also sent to foreign countries for ship-builders and various artisans, but not satisfied with that, he afterwards resolved on visiting some of those countries himself, for the express purpose of learning how his own kingdom might best be benefited.

In pursuance of this plan, he, together with a few chosen associates, first went to Holland, at which place he worked as a common labourer in the dockyards, no one but those of his own party knowing who he was. He next came to England. It was his purpose to visit Italy likewise, but a revolt amongst his people at home, and rumours that his sister Sophia was trying to make herself empress of Russia, obliged him to return after an absence of only two years.

Having now acquired considerable knowledge in ship-building and other valuable arts, Peter began to see the advantages which would accrue to his country, by the establishment of a port on the Baltic sea, at the mouth of the Neva. There were many difficulties in the way of such an undertaking, and one of the most formidable was, the low marshy state of the land. These difficulties however, he determined upon conquering. Had the Czar attempted to accomplish the same ends by justifiable means, we should admire his forethought and genius, but as on the contrary, he carried them out by force and cruelty, every humane heart must condemn the act as one of tyranny and oppression. No seemingly desirable end can justify us in using unlawful means.

To provide workmen for the undertaking, the Emperor in the year 1703, sent bands of soldiers into the villages with orders to compel those men who were capable of labour to engage in the task. Our young friends have no doubt heard of the press gangs which were at one time allowed in England, and of the conscription in France. Well, this was a somewhat similar procedure, only instead of being forced to become sailors and soldiers, as the pressed men and conscripts were, these poor people were compelled to make roads and rear a city in an immense bog. The peasants, or serfs, as they are called in Russia, were at that period in a very degraded state. They were considered as much the property of the nobles on whose estates they lived, as any other live stock. Their houses mostly consisted of but one room. In the centre of this room was a large brick oven: in this they baked their black rye bread; and the top served for a bed for the whole family at night. Their only articles of furniture were, a lamp suspended from the ceiling, and a rough bench or two fastened to the walls. They were clothed in sheepskins, and their food was of the coarsest kind. Bad as was

their lot, however, very few, if any of them, were willing to exchange it for labour on public works of any kind, especially in such an unhealthy situation as the marshes we have spoken of. The impure air which rises from swampy ground is almost sure to bring on fevers and other disorders. Then no care was taken to make them as comfortable as the circumstances would have permitted; no houses were provided for them to sleep in, and the tools they had given them to work with were so unsuitable and bad, that their labours were thereby made much harder than they would otherwise have been.

Exposed thus to hardships of every kind, the men, as might be expected, perished by hundreds. But these disastrous results were not allowed to interrupt the work: for as fast as they died off, others were pressed into the service and marched off to the place. In Russia the Emperor has absolute power over all his subjects: even the nobles, therefore, dared not to oppose the mandate, had they been so disposed. Among the unhappy individuals who were chosen for the purpose of filling up vacancies made by the sick and deceased, was our friend Michael Kopt. His general home being away from any of the villages, he, for some time, escaped observation; but when strong, healthy men became scarce in the neighbourhood, he and some of his companions were pressed into the service, only a few minutes being given them for preparing, and bidding adieu to their weeping friends.

Poor Margaret was for some time inconsolable, and Gerald was almost in as much grief at seeing her suffer. He tried to cheer her by every means in his power; but finding that she was hopeless of ever having her husband back again, he formed a resolution which our young readers shall hear at another time.

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