THE SAMOVAR GIRL

BY

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Table of Contents

TO

ROBERT H. DAVIS

THE SAMOVAR GIRL

PROLOGUE
THE VALLEY OF DESPAIR

Clank! Clank! Clank!

It was the music of chains. A column of unfortunates from the big prison on the hill swung down the road and turned into the wide street between the log houses. They were on their way out into the *taiga* to cut wood and hew timbers under a guard of Cossacks. The chains hanging from the wrists of the convicts to their ankles, crossed in front of them but hidden under the *khalats*—long gray capes worn by exiles—made the doleful music as the long line of marchers, gray as the cold fog of the morning, moved up the Czar's road and was lost in the frozen mists that masked the edge of the wilderness.

The sun was up, but it was only a patch of weak yellow light against the dull sky which roofed the Valley of Despair. Lowering wisps of fog still shrouded the hills about the exile settlement—fog that had lifted from the frozen and desolate reaches of the Ingoda, from the smoking huts of the tiny plain, from the snow-streaked slopes on which squatted like a hideous monster the great low, rambling prison of yellow-painted logs.

The morning was bitter cold. The streets were almost deserted. The windows of the log buildings still glowed with the dim yellow light of guttering candles behind the frost-bound panes. White smoke from the chimneys of the houses and huts rose

straight up into the air, for there was not even the ghost of a breeze. And the cold still air carried sounds with startling clearness—the tolling of a bell at lazy intervals, the barking of a dog, the distant cry of a wolf, and now the ringing clatter of axes being driven into frost-laden wood by the invisible exiles.

Shadows appeared at the windows frequently. For the Czar's mail was due this morning from Irkutsk, and the house-huddled people were waiting for the first tinkle of the sledge-bells. The mail! The mail from Moscow, from Petersburg, from Tambov, from the Valley of the Beloved Volga, so many heartbreaking versts away! The mail would bring life and death, joy and sorrow, sentence and pardon to Chita, in the Valley of Despair. The mail would bring the Czar's word, the heaven-sent mercy, or the curt condemnation. The mail, by the relays of sledges, was the reach of the scepter from the throne of majesty to the Valley of Despair in Siberia.

None listened more eagerly for the first jingle of the mail-sledges that morning than Peter, son of Peter, in the tiny hut of Gorekin the bootmaker, an exile but by the gracious compassion of the governor a member of the "free gang." Peter, son of Peter, was only ten years old. He worked with his father in the boxlike hut on the Sofistkaya, helping to make boots for the officers of the Czar and the Cossacks.

Peter's blue eyes were set deeply in his head, for he had never had enough to eat—not even enough sticky black bread, or enough *eèkrah* which is the raw, red eggs of the big salmon. Peter was a tall boy for his age, but not very sturdy. His yellow hair was clipped close to his scalp, and his little round head

was bent low while his hammer *tap-tapped* at the wooden pegs in the boot soles by the candlelight.

Peter's father was a political. He had been sent to Siberia for thinking—thinking about government, and inducing others to think. Which was foolish, for the Czar and his ministers settled all affairs of government for the good of the people. Yet God was good, for Peter's father had been admitted to the free gang because he could make boots, and so did not have to stay in the big prison on the hill. And Michael Alexandrovitch Kirsakoff, Excellence, and Czar's Governor, allowed Peter and his father to have a tiny hut to themselves—a place of one room, one window, a fire-pit with a stone chimney, and shelves against the log wall on which to sleep. They even had a battered brass samovar in which to boil water for their tea.

Peter's father was not old, though his back was bent by years in chains before Peter was born, and then by more years of stooping over a stitching-frame sewing boots. "Gorekin the old bootmaker," everybody called him, partly because his face was covered with a long and heavy beard, and partly because his eyes had such an old look in them—eyes which looked past everybody far into the future and seemed to be waiting for some strange vision to appear.

Peter was proud of his father, and loved him beyond expression. For his father knew everything—even knew how many versts it was to Moscow, information which many people gave money to know, and knowing, kept the secret for themselves. There are many things in an exile colony which it is forbidden to know, so whisper talk is bought and sold, some

dealing in secrets of a certain kind, and some selling coming news about revolutions.

Peter's little round head was always being puzzled, and his blue eyes were always full of questions. He loved the Czar, just as everybody else loved the Czar—only when there were no soldiers listening, or no secret police of the Third Division, men would swear bitter oaths in whispers against majesty. It was not easy to tell who might be secret police, for your friend today, talking against the government of the Czar, might tomorrow prove to be one of the Third Division, and then doors of the big prison on the hill would open for you, and dawn would meet you with an execution squad.

Peter could not remember his mother. She had followed his father into exile, and Peter had been born in The Street of the Dames. His mother had died that day. Peter's father said now it was just as well, for life was really death in the Valley of Despair. And though Peter was only ten, he already knew something of the bitterness of life. Had he not seen a man with a back all raw from whipping, who had escaped from the prison? Yes, he had come crawling to the bootmaker's hut, too weak to go on into the wilderness with the others who had escaped, and could only lie all night close to the fire-pit, waiting for the soldiers to come in the morning and take him away.

But there were pleasant things in life for Peter. There were the ladies who came from The Street of the Dames. They spoke Czar's Russian and were grand ladies. They came to have boots mended, but they stayed long and whispered much with Peter's father, winking and nodding their heads about nothing at all. Sometimes they brought little cakes with spices in them,

or a handful of dry tea, or a bit of sugar from China, or sweetened ginger-root. And sometimes they gave Peter as much as a ruble. Their husbands were up in the big prison on the hill, and the grand ladies had followed to the Valley of Despair and had built for themselves with their own hands a whole street of log houses.

And for some reason which Peter could never fathom, after these ladies from The Street of the Dames came to have their shoes mended, Peter's father always remembered that he had to go up to the prison with a pair of new boots for an officer, or to measure feet for a new pair, or to get some leather—always an errand. And the ladies would wait till he returned, when they cried quietly into their handkerchiefs, and after much whispering went away to their log houses.

But the greatest puzzle of all to Peter was that his father had been exiled for reading books, yet his father now read the Bible, which was a book, and told all about God and the Czar. But, of course, the Bible was always hidden behind the pile of wood close to the fire-pit.

And Peter's father read the almanacs which came every year from Moscow, and everybody knows an almanac is nothing more nor less than a book. Everybody had a new almanac every year, and wonderful books they were too, for they told about the sun, moon, and stars, the holy days of Holy Russia, the goodness and greatness of the Czar, the names and name days of grand dukes and grand duchesses and all the wonderful things they had done for the poor people, and had pictures of saints, and depictions of miracles, pictures of watches which might be purchased in Moscow or Petrograd by people who

were rich, and pictures of skeletons of dead men! Oh, the almanacs were wonderful!

Peter had worn his last year's one out from much reading of it by the fire of nights with his father. And now the new one from Moscow was two months late. That was why Peter watched so anxiously every morning for the mail-sledges from Irkutsk, which was on the Petersburg side of Lake Baikal.

So this morning he was pegging away fast with his hammer, his father working near by and whispering to himself, a way he had when busy. The candle was still guttering between them, the fire in the pit was smoking comfortably, and the old brass samovar was singing merrily on a shelf.

Peter leaned over from his bench every few minutes, to blow a hole in the frost on the windowpane, and look up the Sofistkaya in the direction of the post-house. But he could not see far yet, from the fog, though he did see the column of unfortunates going out into the wilderness with the Cossack soldiers.

Peter rather feared the Cossacks. They were "free men"—big swaggering fellows with blue breeches and yellow stripes on their tunics and some of them with colored tops in their tall *shlapkas*—round caps of fuzzy wool. And though Peter feared the Cossacks, he was also proud of them, for they were a part of Holy Russia and the power of the Czar flashed from the points of their lances as they galloped over the plains. And the Czar was Ataman of all the Cossacks, just as he was Emperor of all Russians. And there were more Russians in the world than

all other peoples put together, counting the barbarians of far lands across the seas.

Peter longed for the day when he would be big enough to become a soldier of majesty, and wear on his cap the little oval button—"The Eye of the Czar." Then he would know all things. His father always smiled sadly at such ideas.

"Peter Petrovitch Gorekin, a soldier of the Czar!" Peter's father would say. "A soldier against the people, a soldier to bind our chains the tighter! Oh, Peter Petrovitch! The day will come when your eye will see and understand!"

Which was a surprising thing for Peter's father to say, for Peter could see well enough with his eyes, except when the smoke from the fire-pit blew down the stone chimney and got into his eyes while he was reading from the almanac and learning new words.

Peter's father was most anxious for Peter to learn to read as well as the priest—yes, even as well as Michael Alexandrovitch Kirsakoff, the Colonel Governor. Peter could have made many kopecks in the evenings, helping to skin sheep for the butcher, but Peter's father insisted upon lessons with the almanac by the fire.

"The labor of a man's hands can be forced to do the will of a master," his father would say gravely, "but the labor of a man's head is his own, and no man can control it."

Peter could not understand that, because it was impossible to drive pegs with one's head—it could only be done with hands

and the hammer. And his father worked with his hands, too, and never did a thing with his head, or so Peter supposed.

It was not long after the column of unfortunates and Cossacks had disappeared into the *taiga* that Peter saw two black spots rise on the little hill across the Ingoda River, and drop again out of sight.

“Ee-yah!” cried Peter joyfully. “The mail comes!”

His father lifted his head and looked up from his stitching-frame to listen.

“I hear nothing but the music of the samovar,” he said.

“They have crossed the bend to the river,” insisted Peter. “I heard the bells and I saw the sledges! The horses are coming fast!”

Both sat still and listened, with only the snapping of the fire and the song of the samovar in their ears. Though they waited in silence, the sound of the bells did not come to them down the chimney.

“Watch the road,” said his father, and returned to his stitching. Peter put his eye to the hole in the frost and watched the street up beyond the post-house. But he saw only an occasional Buriat, or a Cossack striding along, with now and then a Tartar hunter coming in from the hills with raw fur thrown over his shoulders, and soldiers hurrying down from the prison above the settlement.

Then, the bells! The first faint jingle came to Peter’s ears, and at the same time he saw the galloping horses of the leading sledge

come up into the road from the river hollow, running free for the post-house.

“Now!” cried Peter. “The post is here! With the new almanacs! Please! Give me the kopecks! And may I run to see if the new almanac has come for sure?”

Peter’s father stopped work and filled his glass from the samovar, threw on the fire a fresh chunk of wood and dug some kopecks from his pocket.

“Go, little son, but dress warmly—it is too cold outside for a Tartar.”

Peter shoved his rag-bound feet into pink felt boots, whirled his long muffler about his neck and got into his gray coat. Pulling his cap over his head and ears, he took the kopecks from his father and flew out through the door in a cloud of white steam made by the warm air from inside the hut as it escaped into the frigid atmosphere outside.

Already the sledges had arrived in front of the post-house. The street was filled with people and there was a great to-do and gabbling. Peter could see the Cossack guards who had come with the sledges dismounting from their horses. The half-frozen drivers of the sledges were rolling stiffly out of their blankets, to clump through the icicle-fringed door of the post-house for their hot bowls of *borsht* and their drams of vodka.

Peter ran up to the crowd surrounding the sledges and breathlessly pushed in between the legs of the soldiers and onlookers. Surely, he thought, this month the almanacs must have come! Twice before he had been disappointed by the

monthly mail and now he was shaking with eagerness. He wanted to cry out at once to those about the sledges, “Has the new almanac come?”

But there were no mail sacks on the first sledge. Instead it had five travelers—an old woman, an officer who was an aide of the Colonel Governor, two fur-buyers, and a little girl—a pretty little girl, who was about the same age as Peter. She had pulled back her beautiful cap of ermine, and Peter could see the pink of her cheeks, her laughing blue eyes and the scarlet silk lining of her coat of sables where she had turned the collar away from her chin. She was standing up in the sledge and looking over the heads of the crowd and chattering with her old nurse in delight at having arrived back at her home.

Peter stared at the little girl. He knew who she was—Katerin Stephanovna Kirsakoff, daughter of the Colonel Governor. Peter had seen her many times driving through the settlement with her Cossack outriders guarding her. He knew she was kind to the poor people and to the unfortunates. On Butter Weeks she always threw silver kopecks from her carriage to the crowds at the fair. It was said that she knew even the Czar himself.

Peter thought Katerin was as beautiful as a picture in a holy icon. He almost forgot about his beloved almanacs as he stood and gazed at the beauty of Katerin. Her furs were so rich and gorgeous, her skin was so clear and rosy, her eyes were so sparkling bright. She had plenty of good things to eat, he was sure—and the cold did not hurt her, the guards of Cossacks protected her from the gaunt tigers in the hills, the officers bowed to her, the soldiers worshiped her, and she lived in the

great and grand house of her father, the Colonel Governor, Michael Alexandrovitch Kirsakoff.

“The Governor comes!” rose the warning cry from those on the outer fringes of the throng about the sledges. The soldiers at once began to drive the people back from the sledge in which Katerin was standing to clear the way for the droshky of the Colonel Governor.

Peter was inside the ring of people about the sledge. He was pushed away roughly. His heart sank, for he felt that he was to be cheated out of the news for which he had run to the post-house—news about the almanacs. He could restrain his eagerness no longer, and fearing that he would be left in doubt about the almanacs if the soldiers hustled him up the street with the other people, he ran from a soldier in toward the sledge, and making an obeisance to Excellence, raised his arms and cried out to Katerin, “Did your Excellence bring the almanacs of the new year?”

But Katerin did not hear him. She was standing up and clapping her hands as she saw her father’s droshky come whirling down the street toward her.

The officer in the sledge got out of the robes wound round him, and to the ground. He commanded the soldiers to drive the people away farther so the Colonel Governor might not be delayed in getting to his daughter.

Peter turned to run from this officer, but slipped and fell. And before he could regain his footing on the hard and slippery snow, the officer came hurrying from the sledge and tripped

and fell over the boy—fell flat in the road before the post-house.

“Fool!” cried the officer, glaring at Peter. “Get away with you! You dare address Excellence, and now you are in my road!”

Peter stood up. The officer struck the boy in the face, and Peter fell again, almost stunned by the blow. He saw the officer’s boots stride away and recognized them as boots which he and his father had made. There was a forest of boots in all directions, and the sound of voices reached Peter’s ears in a confused medley.

Peter was ashamed. The blood was flowing from his nose and making a mess on his chin and muffler. The tears which came into his eyes from the pain were freezing on his cheeks and his eyelids were freezing together, making a film through which he could see but dimly.

The crowd had drawn away from the sledge now, leaving Peter lying in the dirty snow. Such a sight to make of himself, he thought, in view of Katerin! And how angry she would be to see that he had gotten in the way of the officer and had made him fall down like a clumsy bear.

Peter heard the voice of his father calling to him.

“Little son! Get up quickly and run! The Governor comes! Do not let the Excellence see you there!”

But Peter could not move quickly for his arms and legs seemed strangely stiff and numb and helpless. His father ran out into the open space just as Governor Kirsakoff got out of his