My reflections during the journey were not very pleasant. According to the value of money at that time, my loss was of some importance. I could not but confess to myself that my conduct at the Simbirsk Inn had been most foolish, and I felt guilty toward Savéliitch. All this worried me. The old man sat, in sulky silence, in the forepart of the sledge, with his face averted, every now and then giving a cross little cough. I had firmly resolved to make peace with him, but I did not know how to begin. At last I said to him--

"Look here, Savéliitch, let us have done with all this; let us make peace."

"Oh! my little father, Petr' Andréjïtch," he replied, with a deep sigh, "I am angry with myself; it is I who am to blame for everything. What possessed me to leave you alone in the inn? But what could I do; the devil would have it so, else why did it occur to me to go and see my gossip the deacon's wife, and thus it happened, as the proverb says, 'I left the house and was taken to prison.' What ill-luck! What ill-luck! How shall I appear again before my master and mistress? What will they say when they hear that their child is a drunkard and a gamester?"

To comfort poor Savéliitch, I gave him my word of honour that in future I would not spend a single kopek without his consent. Gradually he calmed down, though he still grumbled from time to time, shaking his head--

"A hundred roubles, it is easy to talk!"

I was approaching my destination. Around me stretched a wild and dreary desert, intersected by little hills and deep ravines. All was covered with snow. The sun was setting. My \_kibitka\_ was following the narrow road, or rather the track, left by the sledges of the peasants. All at once my driver looked round, and addressing himself to me--

"Sir," said he, taking off his cap, "will you not order me to turn back?"

"Why?"

"The weather is uncertain. There is already a little wind. Do you not see how it is blowing about the surface snow."

"Well, what does that matter?"

"And do you see what there is yonder?"

The driver pointed east with his whip.

"I see nothing more than the white steppe and the clear sky."

"There, there; look, that little cloud!"

I did, in fact, perceive on the horizon a little white cloud which I had at first taken for a distant hill. My driver explained to me that this little cloud portended a "\_bourane\_."[15] I had heard of the snowstorms peculiar to these regions, and I knew of whole caravans having been sometimes buried in the tremendous drifts of snow. Savéliitch was of the same opinion as the driver, and advised me to turn back, but the wind did not seem to me very violent, and hoping to reach in time the next posting station, I bid him try and get on quickly. He put his horses to a gallop, continually looking, however, towards the east. But the wind increased in force, the little cloud rose rapidly, became larger and thicker, at last covering the whole sky. The snow began to fall lightly at first, but soon in large flakes. The wind whistled and howled; in a moment the grey sky was lost in the whirlwind of snow which the wind raised from the earth, hiding everything around us.

"How unlucky we are, excellency," cried the driver; "it is the \_bourane\_."

I put my head out of the \_kibitka\_; all was darkness and confusion. The wind blew with such ferocity that it was difficult not to think it an animated being.

The snow drifted round and covered us. The horses went at a walk, and soon stopped altogether.

"Why don't you go on?" I said, impatiently, to the driver.

"But where to?" he replied, getting out of the sledge. "Heaven only knows where we are now. There is no longer any road, and it is all dark."

I began to scold him, but Savéliitch took his part.

"Why did you not listen to him?" he said to me, angrily. "You would have gone back to the post-house; you would have had some tea; you could have slept till morning; the storm would have blown over, and we should have started. And why such haste? Had it been to get married, now!"

Savéliitch was right. What was there to do? The snow continued to fall--a heap was rising around the \_kibitka\_. The horses stood motionless, hanging their heads and shivering from time to time.

The driver walked round them, settling their harness, as if he had nothing else to do. Savéliitch grumbled. I was looking all round in hopes of perceiving some indication of a house or a road; but I could not see anything but the confused whirling of the snowstorm.

All at once I thought I distinguished something black.

"Hullo, driver!" I exclaimed, "what is that black thing over there?"

The driver looked attentively in the direction I was pointing out.

"Heaven only knows, excellency," replied he, resuming his seat.

"It is not a sledge, it is not a tree, and it seems to me that it moves. It must be a wolf or a man."

I ordered him to move towards the unknown object, which came also to meet us. In two minutes I saw it was a man, and we met.

"Hey, there, good man," the driver hailed him, "tell us, do you happen to know the road?"

"This is the road," replied the traveller. "I am on firm ground; but what the devil good does that do you?"

"Listen, my little peasant," said I to him, "do you know this part of the country? Can you guide us to some place where we may pass the night?"

"Do I know this country? Thank heaven," rejoined the stranger, "I have travelled here, on horse and afoot, far and wide. But just look at this weather! One cannot keep the road. Better stay here and wait; perhaps the hurricane will cease and the sky will clear, and we shall find the road by starlight."

His coolness gave me courage, and I resigned myself to pass the night on the steppe, commending myself to the care of Providence, when suddenly the stranger, seating himself on the driver's seat, said--

"Grace be to God, there \_is\_ a house not far off. Turn to the right, and go on."

"Why should I go to the right?" retorted my driver, ill-humouredly.

"How do you know where the road is that you are so ready to say, 'Other people's horses, other people's harness--whip away!'"

It seemed to me the driver was right.

"Why," said I to the stranger, "do you think a house is not far off?"

"The wind blew from that direction," replied he, "and I smelt smoke, a sure sign that a house is near."

His cleverness and the acuteness of his sense of smell alike astonished me. I bid the driver go where the other wished. The horses ploughed their way through the deep snow. The \_kibitka\_ advanced slowly, sometimes upraised on a drift, sometimes precipitated into a ditch, and swinging from side to side. It was very like a boat on a stormy sea.

Savéliitch groaned deeply as every moment he fell upon me. I lowered the \_tsinofka\_,[16] I rolled myself up in my cloak and I went to sleep, rocked by the whistle of the storm and the lurching of the sledge. I had then a dream that I have never forgotten, and in which I still see something prophetic, as I recall the strange events of my life. The reader will forgive me if I relate it to him, as he knows, no doubt, by experience how natural it is for man to retain a vestige of superstition in spite of all the scorn for it he may think proper to assume.

I had reached the stage when the real and unreal begin to blend into the first vague visions of drowsiness. It seemed to me that the snowstorm continued, and that we were wandering in the snowy desert. All at once I thought I saw a great gate, and we entered the courtyard of our house. My first thought was a fear that my father would be angry at my involuntary return to the paternal roof, and would attribute it to a premeditated disobedience. Uneasy, I got out of my \_kibitka\_, and I saw my mother come to meet me, looking very sad.

"Don't make a noise," she said to me. "Your father is on his death-bed, and wishes to bid you farewell."

Struck with horror, I followed her into the bedroom. I look round; the room is nearly dark. Near the bed some people were standing, looking sad and cast down. I approached on tiptoe. My mother raised the curtain, and said--

"Andréj Petróvitch, Petróusha has come back; he came back having heard of your illness. Give him your blessing."

I knelt down. But to my astonishment instead of my father I saw in the bed a black-bearded peasant, who regarded me with a merry look. Full of surprise, I turned towards my mother.

"What does this mean?" I exclaimed. "It is not my father. Why do you want me to ask this peasant's blessing?"

"It is the same thing, Petróusha," replied my mother. "That person is your \_godfather\_.[17] Kiss his hand, and let him bless you."

I would not consent to this. Whereupon the peasant sprang from the bed, quickly drew his axe from his belt, and began to brandish it in all directions. I wished to fly, but I could not. The room seemed to be suddenly full of corpses. I stumbled against them; my feet slipped in pools of blood. The terrible peasant called me gently, saying to me--

"Fear nothing, come near; come and let me bless you."

Fear had stupified me....

At this moment I awoke. The horses had stopped; Savéliitch had hold of my hand.

"Get out, excellency," said he to me; "here we are."

"Where?" I asked, rubbing my eyes.

"At our night's lodging. Heaven has helped us; we came by chance right upon the hedge by the house. Get out, excellency, as quick as you can, and let us see you get warm."

I got out of the \_kibitka\_. The snowstorm still raged, but less violently. It was so dark that one might, as we say, have as well been blind. The host received us near the entrance, holding a lantern beneath the skirt of his caftan, and led us into a room, small but prettily clean, lit by a \_loutchina\_.[18] On the wall hung a long carbine and a high Cossack cap.

Our host, a Cossack of the Yaïk,[19] was a peasant of about sixty, still fresh and hale. Savéliitch brought the tea canister, and asked for a fire that he might make me a cup or two of tea, of which, certainly, I never had more need. The host hastened to wait upon him.

"What has become of our guide? Where is he?" I asked Savéliitch.

"Here, your excellency," replied a voice from above.

I raised my eyes to the recess above the stove, and I saw a black beard and two sparkling eyes.

"Well, are you cold?"

"How could I not be cold," answered he, "in a little caftan all holes? I had a \_touloup\_, but, it's no good hiding it, I left it yesterday in pawn at the brandy shop; the cold did not seem to me then so keen."

At this moment the host re-entered with the boiling \_samovar\_.[20] I offered our guide a cup of tea. He at once jumped down.

I was struck by his appearance. He was a man about forty, middle height, thin, but broad-shouldered. His black beard was beginning to turn grey; his large quick eyes roved incessantly around. In his face there was an expression rather pleasant, but slightly mischievous. His hair was cut short. He wore a little torn \_armak\_,[21] and wide Tartar trousers.

I offered him a cup of tea; he tasted it, and made a wry face.

"Do me the favour, your excellency," said he to me, "to give me a glass of brandy; we Cossacks do not generally drink tea."

I willingly acceded to his desire. The host took from one of the shelves of the press a jug and a glass, approached him, and, having looked him well in the face--

"Well, well," said he, "so here you are again in our part of the world. Where, in heaven's name, do you come from now?"

My guide winked in a meaning manner, and replied by the well-known saying--

"The sparrow was flying about in the orchard; he was eating hempseed; the grandmother threw a stone at him, and missed him. And you, how are you all getting on?"

"How are we all getting on?" rejoined the host, still speaking in proverbs.

"Vespers were beginning to ring, but the wife of the \_pope\_[22] forbid it; the pope went away on a visit, and the devils are abroad in the churchyard."

"Shut up, uncle," retorted the vagabond. "When it rains there will be mushrooms, and when you find mushrooms you will find a basket to put them in. But now" (he winked a second time) "put your axe behind your back,[23] the gamekeeper is abroad. To the health of your excellency."

So saying he took the glass, made the sign of the cross, and swallowed his brandy at one gulp, then, bowing to me, returned to his lair above the stove.

I could not then understand a single word of the thieves' slang they employed. It was only later on that I understood that they were talking about the army of the Yaïk, which had only just been reduced to submission after the revolt of 1772.[24]

Savéliitch listened to them talking with a very discontented manner, and cast suspicious glances, sometimes on the host and sometimes on the guide.

The kind of inn where we had sought shelter stood in the very middle of the steppe, far from the road and from any dwelling, and certainly was by no means unlikely to be a robber resort. But what could we do? We could not dream of resuming our journey. Savéliitch's uneasiness amused me very much. I stretched myself on a bench. My old retainer at last decided to get up on the top of the stove,[25] while the host lay down on the floor. They all soon began to snore, and I myself soon fell dead asleep.

When I awoke, somewhat late, on the morrow I saw that the storm was over. The sun shone brightly; the snow stretched afar like a dazzling sheet. The horses were already harnessed. I paid the host, who named such a mere trifle as my reckoning that Savéliitch did not bargain as he usually did. His suspicions of the evening before were quite gone. I called the guide to thank him for what he had done for us, and I told Savéliitch to give him half a rouble as a reward.

Savéliitch frowned.

"Half a rouble!" cried he. "Why? Because you were good enough to bring him yourself to the inn? I will obey you, excellency, but we have no half roubles to spare. If we take to giving gratuities to everybody we shall end by dying of hunger."

I could not dispute the point with Savéliitch; my money, according to my solemn promise, was entirely at his disposal. Nevertheless, I was annoyed that I was not able to reward a man who, if he had not brought me out of fatal danger, had, at least, extricated me from an awkward dilemma.

"Well," I said, coolly, to Savéliitch, "if you do not wish to give him half a rouble give him one of my old coats; he is too thinly clad. Give him my hareskin \_touloup\_."

"Have mercy on me, my father, Petr' Andréjïtch!" exclaimed Savéliitch. "What need has he of your \_touloup\_? He will pawn it for drink, the dog, in the first tavern he comes across."

"That, my dear old fellow, is no longer your affair," said the vagabond, "whether I drink it or whether I do not. His excellency honours me with a coat off his own back.[26] It is his excellency's will, and it is your duty as a serf not to kick against it, but to obey."

"You don't fear heaven, robber that you are," said Savéliitch, angrily. "You see the child is still young and foolish, and you are quite ready to plunder him, thanks to his kind heart. What do you want with a gentleman's \_touloup\_? You could not even put it across your cursed broad shoulders."

"I beg you will not play the wit," I said to my follower. "Get the cloak quickly."

"Oh! good heavens!" exclaimed Savéliitch, bemoaning himself. "A \_touloup\_ of hareskin, and still quite new! And to whom is it given?--to a drunkard in rags."

However, the \_touloup\_ was brought. The vagabond began trying it on directly. The \_touloup\_, which had already become somewhat too small for me, was really too tight for him. Still, with some trouble, he succeeded in getting it on, though he cracked all the seams. Savéliitch gave, as it were, a subdued howl when he heard the threads snapping.

As to the vagabond, he was very pleased with my present. He ushered me to my \_kibitka\_, and saying, with a low bow, "Thanks, your excellency; may Heaven reward you for your goodness; I shall never forget, as long as I live, your kindnesses," went his way, and I went mine, without paying any attention to Savéliitch's sulkiness.

I soon forgot the snowstorm, the guide, and my hareskin \_touloup\_.

Upon arrival at Orenburg I immediately waited on the General. I found a tall man, already bent by age. His long hair was quite white; his old uniform reminded one of a soldier of Tzarina Anne's[27] time, and he spoke with a strongly-marked German accent. I gave him my father's letter. Upon reading his name he cast a quick glance at me.

"Ah," said he, "it was but a short time Andréj Petróvitch was your age, and now he has got a fine fellow of a son. Well, well--time, time."

He opened the letter, and began reading it half aloud, with a running fire of remarks--

"'Sir, I hope your excellency'--What's all this ceremony? For shame! I wonder he's not ashamed of himself! Of course, discipline before everything; but is it thus one writes to an old comrade? 'Your excellency will not have forgotten'--Humph! 'And when under the late Field Marshal Münich during the campaign, as well as little Caroline'--Eh! eh! \_bruder\_! So he still remembers our old pranks? 'Now for business. I send you my rogue'--Hum! 'Hold him with gloves of porcupine-skin'--What does that mean--'gloves of porcupine-skin?' It must be a Russian proverb.

"What does it mean, 'hold with gloves of porcupine-skin?'" resumed he, turning to me.

"It means," I answered him, with the most innocent face in the world, "to treat someone kindly, not too strictly, to leave him plenty of liberty; that is what holding with gloves of porcupine-skin means."

"Humph! I understand."

"'And not give him any liberty'--No; it seems that porcupine-skin gloves means something quite different.' Enclosed is his commission'--Where is it then? Ah! here it is!--'in the roll of the Séménofsky Regiment'--All right; everything necessary shall be done. 'Allow me to salute you without ceremony, and like an old friend and comrade'--Ah! he has at last remembered it all," etc., etc.

"Well, my little father," said he, after he had finished the letter and put my commission aside, "all shall be done; you shall be an officer in the ----th Regiment, and you shall go to-morrow to Fort Bélogorsk, where you will serve under the orders of Commandant Mironoff, a brave and worthy man. There you will really serve and learn discipline. There is nothing for you to do at Orenburg; amusement is bad for a young man. To-day I invite you to dine with me."

"Worse and worse," thought I to myself. "What good has it done me to have been a sergeant in the Guard from my cradle? Where has it brought me? To the ----th Regiment, and to a fort stranded on the frontier of the Kirghiz-Kaïsak Steppes!"

I dined at Andréj Karlovitch's, in the company of his old aide de camp. Strict German economy was the rule at his table, and I think that the dread of a frequent guest at his bachelor's table contributed not a little to my being so promptly sent away to a distant garrison.

The next day I took leave of the General, and started for my destination.