

A Cossack Practical Joke

Young Giant Tells the Story
With Great Gusto

"Well, in my troop we worked a devilish good joke last night!" The young Cossack giant of a lieutenant leaned over, grabbed the gallon bottle of vodka in both his hairy hands and took a long pull to refresh his memory.

It was a hot day, last April, down in the Caucasian mountains—home of ten million Georgians, Armenians and Tartars, all subjects of the Russian Czar—rebellious, but held down to loyalty by fifty thousand Cossacks. The Cossacks—the only loyal subjects left to Nicholas the Second, savage police, two hundred thousand strong; splendid horse-men, cruel, ignorant and superstitious, unflinching, boisterous, glorious savages all. Such are the men who have battered down the revolution in Russia.

My interpreter Ivanhoff and I had sat joking for the last two hours in the same train compartment with three Cossack officers—one gruff old colonel and two lieutenants, wearing long brown-belted cloaks with poinards stuck in the belts. Their gray fur caps were off. These massive, bristling faces were red and glistened from the vodka. They had finished two and a half gallons in two hours.

"Well, don't swallow the bottle," growled the old colonel. "Hand it over. Now, what's your joke?" The young Cossack wiped his thick red lips with the back of his hand and laughed. His frank brown eyes glistened. He was the kind of man you like at once and can't tell why.

"Well, my troop was giving me a send-off, and of course we all get roaring full. Out we marched on the steep village street. Mountains, clouds and houses all flew around with the stars—that's how it looked to me. I kept slipping on the wet cobblestones. Every time I went down my chum Luka got in a hard kick. Luka and I had always been like brothers; all that day he had been feeling bad about my going off, so now he had got drunk as a devil! I've never seen him worse. The Georgian fools grabbed all their women and ran like rats for their houses. Doors kept slamming—slam, slam, slam! We shouted songs, we cursed till the mountains cracked, we played all the old tricks. At last we saw one man left in the street—a thin old devil of a Jew trying to sneak from one house to another.

"Grab him!" yelled Luka. We made a rush. The Jew dove for his hole, and wriggled like a rat when we nabbed him. Look! here's where his long yellow nails scratched my arm. But his scratches didn't last long. He got weak and fell in the mud, and lay taking big slow breaths. Mother of Christ! how mad he was! His eyes were so hot with rage that we stood around and laughed till the tears came.

"Then we boosted him up on our shoulders and had a march down the street! Every minute he gave a big wriggle and a squawk. Then he prayed and got quiet. We marched into the barracks yard.

"Let's baptize the devil," some fellow shouted. We all heaved him up into the parasha (tub)—a big one—five feet square and six feet high. It was full up to the brim; the soldiers had just cleaned the horse stalls. In he went with a splash.

"But the cute old Jew went in feet first and kept his head up out of the mess. He stood there up to his neck. His old eyes glared over the edge and he cursed the colonel.

"What!" roared the colonel. "What was that?"

"The Jew's voice got a little louder and slower. He cursed slowly.

"The colonel hauled out his revolver. He leaned close to the tub and stuck the barrel close to the face of the Jew.

"Now," he yelled, "when I count three, I shoot!" The old Jew rolled his eyes till you could see nothing but white spots. Have you ever seen a reoster just before his head was cut

off! That's it. His eyelids kept shutting up and down quick. He bit so hard his under lip got bleeding. The colonel turned at us and winked. Then he got red again and roared—"One Two! . . . Three!"

"Bang! The smoke blew back and hit us all the eyes, we stood so close. When it cleared, there was the old Jew's head dripping, squawking, sputtering! He had ducked all right! And lucky he did. The rim of the tub was splintered right in front of his crooked nose. And his face—and his eyes—you ought to have seen his eyes!

"Well, we just rolled in the mud and slapped each other and howled. Then some one sat up and yelled, 'There he goes!' The sly rat had crawled out and was hobbling for the gate. You ought to have seen the look on his face when he looked over his crooked shoulder and saw us coming.

"We yanked him back, and then everybody had his turn. It took till daylight. No priest has ever done the job so well.

"When we let him go, he stood in the gate, black against the first sunlight behind him. You could see his knees shake. He raised his wet old arm and held it there shaking. The water dripped off him; his clothes stuck tight and showed all his bones and ugly joints.

"Speech! speech!" we yelled. But he stood like a silent old devil. Then we got sorry for the old brute. We laughed to show that it was only a joke and we were through with him. The colonel went up and slapped him on the back. 'Give us a talk!' he shouted.

"But the old Jew just kept his skinny hand raised up. When we got quiet, we heard his deep Jew voice, low and shaking. He said some Jew curse like this: 'O Jehovah'—and then something I've forgotten, and then—remember this: remember this! His hand kept shaking.

"We all lay back and roared. At last he got tired of his slow old curses. He turned to go.

"Well, Luka was cross by this time. His head was clear and he got thinking about me and got thinking of him; both of us were as cross as bears. So now Luka sat up and shied a cavalry boot. It caught the Jew between the shoulders and helped him into the street.

"You ought to have seen the way his wet clothes showed his ugly bones! That's what made it so devilish funny! He was the ugliest old dog I've ever laid eyes on!"—Ernest Poole, in *The Outlook*.

Couldn't Go the Last

An Irishman had just "come over," and being hungry, went to one of the swellest hotels in New York. When the waiter appeared to take his order he said: "Bring me the best you have."

After being gone a few minutes the waiter returned with a glass of water, a bunch of celery and a lobster.

When about time to check him up the waiter returned to the customer, asking him why he had not eaten his meal.

"Well," replied the man, "I drank the water and smelled of the bouquet, but I'll be durned if I could go the bug."

Call for the Label.

It is of no use to try to conceal the sorrowful facts by fine words, and to talk to the workman about the honorableness of manual labor and dignity of humanity. Rough work, honorable or not, takes the life out of us; and the men who have been heaving clay out of a ditch all day, or driving an express train against the north wind all night, or holding a collier's helm in a gale on a lee shore, or whirling hot iron at a furnace mouth, is not the same at the end of his day or night as one who has been sitting in a quiet room, with everything comfortable about him, reading books or classing butterflies or painting pictures. *Anakin.*

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