

THE COWARD

By Alphonse Courlander

Illustrated by Ruth Stemm.

THROUGH the cobbled streets of the little Russian town marched a regiment of soldiers, crooning a mournful folk-song, as is the custom when marching at ease. Peasants they were, for the greater part, snatched from their bread-earning labor and made

to change their red blouses and blue-peaked caps for the dirty fawn overcoat with the baschlik head-covering and the blue-rimmed "pancake" cap. Their faces seemed all cast in the same mold—the mold of despair—and they marched along, with loose-swinging arms and their monotonously chanted song, like cattle obedient to the stick of the herdsman.

At the window of one of the little houses skirting the street a girl stood, watching the soldiers march by.

"See, Igor," she cried, turning to a man who stood at her side, "isn't that fine! Aren't they men? Sons of the czar-father! And think, you will be one of them one day! How proud of you I shall be!"

The man at her side withdrew from the window.

She did not notice his shudder of disgust.

"Ekaterina Ivanovna, talk not like that, I beseech you."

There was something in his voice that caused Ekaterina to turn suddenly upon him. His face was white, even to the lips, and his fingers were intertwined nervously.

"Why—why, Igor—what is the matter with you?"

He shook himself, as though he were trying to shake off some horrible idea. Fear, perhaps.

"You're not afraid, Igor, of soldiering, are you?"

"Ekaterina, milusha, no. How should I be afraid, or weak, with the strength of your love to help me? Only—only, when you talk like that—about the soldiers, I mean—it makes me think of parting from you. That is all."

He placed his arm around her waist and drew her toward him, and kissed her, as the last sound of the soldiers' mournful song died away in the evening echoes.

II.

THAT night Igor lay awake in bed thinking of the fear in his heart.

Ekaterina had been right. How he hated to think that sooner or later he would have to join those shabby-looking ranks; would have to march with four others on a line with his breast, hemmed in with heavily breathing men in the front and in the rear! A uniformed creature without a will . . . downtrodden with the petty discipline of the barracks . . . and the filthy black bread and sechtschi—cabbage soup!

And then—oh, horrors of horrors!—there might be war—red, dreadful war, with the howl of bullets and the thrust of swords! He closed his eyes to shut out an imaginary battlefield.

Why had he not been born an only son, the sole wage-earner in the house? Then

these devils of the czar could not touch him. His life would be uninterrupted. Now, in another year, he would be in the ballot . . . and then, good-by to freedom! How he envied Peter Dimkow—his friend—because he was lamed in one leg.

He rapped his fingers in his ears and cursed Russia, the land which had given him birth.

III.

AND the time came slowly nigh when Igor knew that he was bound to serve in the czar's army. He was sitting in the yard, near the great stack of wood which was kept for fuel. Some laborers had been chopping it, and an ax had been left behind.

Was it yesterday, or years ago, that



The sunlight flashed on the ax at his feet.

"Crooked Peter" was safe; he was no good for soldiering!

A bugle shrilled out in the night from the barracks, and the sound struck with startling significance upon his ears.

Ekaterina—with the proud Slavonic blood in her veins and the glory of the great Russia ever before her—had said to him:

"Soon, Igor, I shall have reason to be proud of thee. Thou wilt indeed be a sol-

A Second Jonah

THE proverbial cat with nine lives cannot claim more honors than one Charles Dunn, a seaman; though while the former is regarded as a charm against evil, the latter is not looked upon as a mascot to the ships he favors.

A recent case brought by the admiralty against Dunn at Liverpool for failing to join his transport disclosed the fact that the sailor had been in four notable shipwrecks, and though others had suffered a watery grave, he had come up smiling on each occasion. Both the ill-fated Titanic and the Empress of Ireland carried Dunn on their last voyages, and he also served on the Lusitania and Florizan when they were torpedoed.

Charles Dunn, consequently, is shunned like the plague by the superstitious sailors, who have on occasions flatly refused to sail with him, and his luck in this connection has proved his greatest misfortune!

There are many similar cases.

A remarkable coincidence that bears out a sailor superstition occurred some while ago at Belfast. A firm built a ship that left Belfast Lough and was subsequently wrecked. A second ship bearing the same name suffered the same fate. The builders then gave the name to a third vessel they had created.

The ship ultimately left the lough and has never been heard of since.

dier in the brave uniform and a rifle in thy hand!"

Was it his fault, he argued, that he had been given a sensitive nature, unused to hardship, a nature which revolted at the idea of war? If he told anyone of his fear they would laugh at him; and yet, how could he escape?

He heard the steady tramp of the soldiers marching on the road outside. Horrible sound! The rhythmical beat of the footsteps dinned into his ears:

"Come! Come, Igor, come! Come! Come! Igor, come!"

He passed his hand over his forehead, and it was wet—wet with fear!

"No! No!" he almost shrieked. "I can't—I can't!"

The sunlight flashed on the blade of the ax at his feet, and a sudden idea surged to his mind. Cost what it may, he would be freed from this everlasting fear of conscription. He seized the ax in his right hand—how light it seemed in the frenzy of the moment—and stretched out his left on the cobblestones of the yard.

He forgot everything—Ekaterina, love, honor, duty and self-respect—in one mad burst of fear that made him, somehow, recklessly brave. The ax gleamed in the air and clanged on the stones through the bone of his thumb. He looked stupidly at the bleeding stump, only as yet half realizing the burning pain and the red stream that spurted from the wound.

Then he cried out and fainted.

He came to his senses hours afterward, in the darkened room.

In his delirium he had cried out:

"They cannot take me now—I am maimed!"

Ekaterina had heard and understood, and later she came into the room and went to his bedside. Sternly pale, she stood over him, her eyes red with the tears she had wept over her shattered idol. She went to his bedside and said the word that branded him for life as an outcast—a wanderer among men.

"Thou coward!" she said deliberately. "When thou art well thou shalt

go forth from here, and every one shall know thee for a faint-hearted!"

"It was an accident!" moaned Igor.

IV.

IHAVE set down the story as I know it. It was told me at a frontier town in Russia by a man to whom I had given tobacco and a few kopecks to buy some food and drink. He was bearded and gray, and his voice was like the whine of a whipped cur.

His shoulders curved forward in a perpetual cringe, and his blood-streaked eyes shifted their gaze jerkily every few seconds. He seemed to be under a shadow, a curse. He was a pariah. Every one pointed to him and laughed at him; some spat in his direction.

But I was moved to compassion, and gave him tobacco and money, and he drew me aside, gripping my wrist like a reincarnation of the Ancient Mariner.

And as he gripped my wrist I noticed that the hand which held me was lacking a thumb.

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She—When you married me you did not marry a cook, I want you to understand. He (sadly)—I know it.