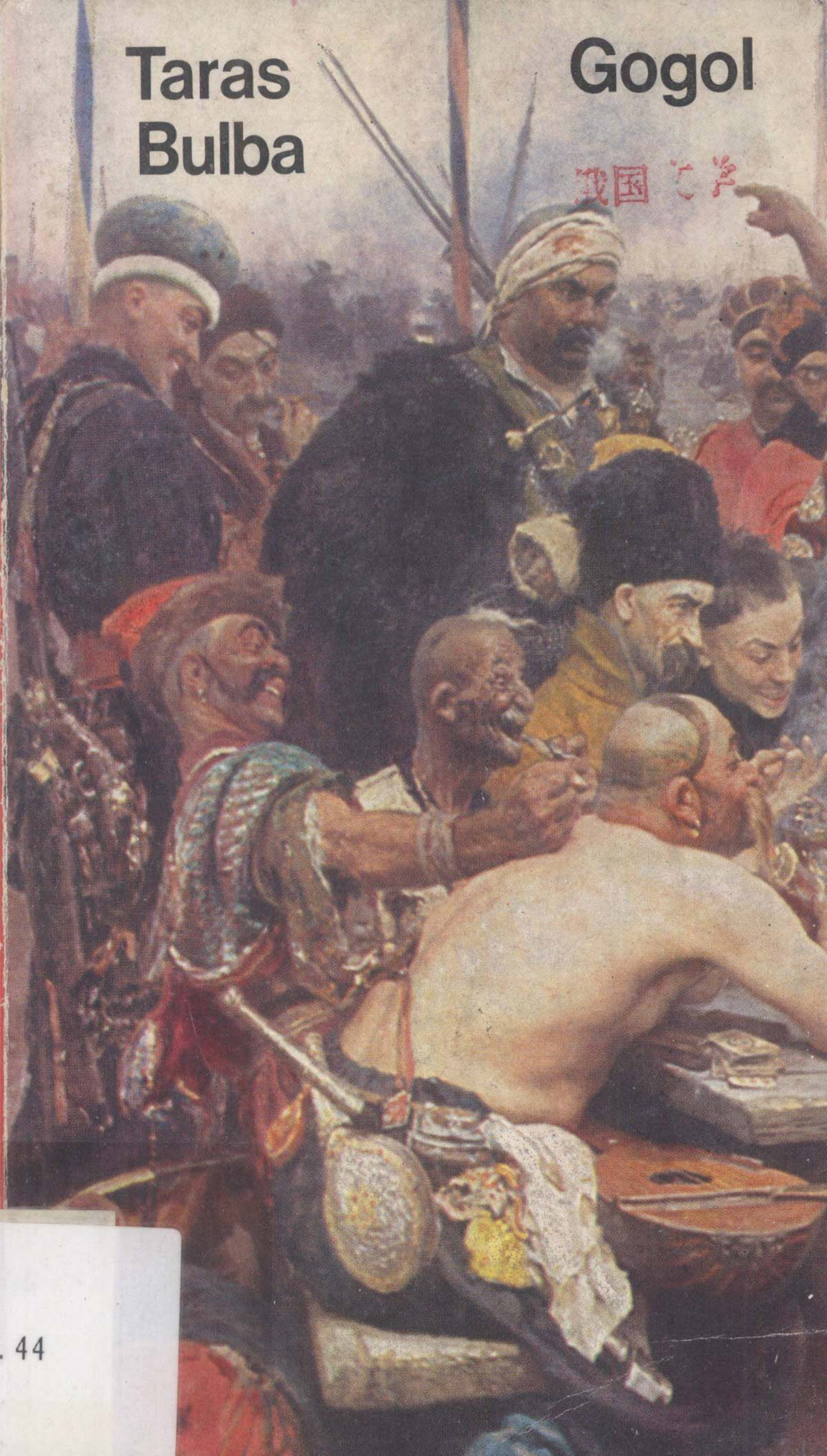
Taras Bulba

Gogol



NIKOLAY GOGOL

Taras Bulba

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EVERYMAN, I will go with thee,

and be thy guide,

In thy most need to go by thy side

NIKOLAY VASILYEVICH GOGOL

Born at Sorochintsy, Russia, on 19th March (Old Style) 1809, Government official, teacher, lecturer at St Petersburg University. Writer and thinker. Lived in Rome from 1837 to 1848. Died on 21st February (O.S.) 1852 in Moscow.

INTRODUCTION

RUSSIAN literature contains no greater creative mystery than Nikolay Vasilyevich Gogol (1809–52), who did for the Russian novel and Russian prose what Pushkin did for Russian poetry. Before these two men came Russian literature can hardly have been said to exist. It was pompous and effete with pseudo-classicism; foreign influences were strong; in the speech of the upper circles there was an overfondness for German, French and English words. Between them the two friends cleared away the debris which made for sterility and erected in their stead a new structure out of living Russian words. Coming up from Little Russia, the Ukraine, with Cossack blood in his veins, Gogol injected his own healthy virus into an effete body, blew his own virile spirit, the spirit of his race, into its nostrils and gave the Russian novel its direction to this very day.

More than that. The nomad and romantic in him, troubled and restless with Ukrainian myth, legend and song, impressed upon Russian literature, faced with the realities of modern life, a spirit titanic and in clash with its material, and produced in the mastery of this everyday material, commonly called sordid, a phantasmagoria intense with beauty. A clue to all Russian realism may be found in a Russian critic's observation about Gogol: 'Seldom has nature created a man so romantic in bent, yet so masterly in portraying all that is unromantic in life.' But this statement does not cover the whole ground, for it is easy to see in almost all of Gogol's work his 'free Cossack soul' trying to break through the shell of sordid today like some ancient demon, essentially Dionysian. So that his works, true though they are to our life, are at once a reproach, a protest and a challenge, ever calling for joy, ancient joy, that is no more with us. And they have all the joy and sadness of the Ukrainian songs he loved so much.

Indeed, so great was his enthusiasm for his own land that after collecting material for many years, the year 1833 finds him at work on a history of 'poor Ukraine', a work planned to take up six volumes. Furthermore, he intended to follow this work with a universal history in eight volumes with a view to establishing, as far as may be gathered, Little Russia and the world in proper relation.

Too much a visionary and a poet to be an impartial historian, it is hardly astonishing to note the judgment he passes on his own work in 1834: 'My history of Little Russia is an extraordinarily mad thing, and it could not be otherwise.' The deeper he goes into Little Russia's past the more fanatically he dreams of Little Russia's future. St Petersburg wearies him, Moscow awakens no emotion in him, he yearns for Kieff, the mother of Russian cities, which in his vision he sees becoming 'the Russian Athens'. Russian history gives him no pleasure, and he separates it definitely from Ukrainian history. During his seven-year stay in St Petersburg (1829–36) Gogol zealously gathered historical material. How completely he dissociated Ukraine from Northern Russia may be judged by the

conspectus of his lectures written in 1832. He says in it, speaking of the conquest of Southern Russia in the fourteenth century by Prince Guedimin at the head of his Lithuanian host, still dressed in the skins of wild beasts, still worshipping the ancient fire and practising pagan rites: 'Then Southern Russia, under the mighty protection of Lithuanian princes, completely separated itself from the North. Every bond between them was broken; two kingdoms were established under a single name—Russia—one under the Tatar yoke, the other under the same rule with Lithuanians. But actually they had no relation with one another; different laws, different customs, different aims, different bonds and different activities gave them wholly different characters.'

This same Prince Guedimin freed Kieff from the Tatar yoke. This city had been laid waste by the hordes of Ghengis Khan and hidden for a very long time from the Slavonic chronicler as behind an impenetrable curtain. A shrewd man, Guedimin appointed a Slavonic prince to rule over the city and permitted the inhabitants to practise their own faith, Greek Christianity. Prior to the Mongol invasion, which brought conflagration and ruin, and subjected Russia to a two-century bondage, cutting her off from Europe, a state of chaos existed and the separate tribes fought with one another constantly and for the most petty reasons. Mutual depredations were possible owing to the absence of mountain ranges; there were no natural barriers against sudden attack. The openness of the steppe made the people warlike. But this very openness made it possible later for Guedimin's pagan hosts, fresh from the fir forests of what is now White Russia, to make a clean sweep of the whole country between Lithuania and Poland, and thus give the scattered princedoms a much-needed cohesion. In this way Ukraine was formed. Whether you looked to the north towards Russia, to the east towards the Tatars, to the south towards the Crimean Tatars, to the west towards Poland, everywhere the country bordered on a field, everywhere on a plain, which left it open to the invader from every side. Had there been here, suggests Gogol in his introduction to his never-written history of Little Russia, if upon one side only, a real frontier of mountain or sea, the people who settled here might have formed a definite political body. Without this natural protection it became a land subject to constant attack and despoliation.

This constant menace acted at last like a fierce hammer shaping and hardening resistance against itself. The fugitive from Poland, the fugitive from the Tatar and the Turk, homeless, with nothing to lose, their lives ever exposed to danger, forsook their peaceful occupations and became transformed into a warlike people, known as the Cossacks, whose appearance towards the end of the thirteenth century or at the beginning of the fourteenth was a remarkable event which possibly alone prevented any further inroads by the two Mohammedan nations into Europe. The appearance of the Cossacks was coincident with the appearance in Europe of brotherhoods and knighthood-orders, and this new race, in spite of its living the life of

marauders, in spite of turning its foes' tactics on its foes, was not free of the religious spirit of its time; if it warred for its existence it warred not less for its faith, which was Greek. Indeed, as the nation grew stronger and became conscious of its strength, the struggle began to partake something of the nature of a religious war, not alone defensive but aggressive also, against the unbeliever. While any man was free to join the brotherhood it was obligatory to believe in the Greek faith. It was this religious unity, blazed into activity by the presence across the borders of unbelieving nations, that alone indicated the germ of a political body in this gathering of men, who otherwise lived the audacious lives of a band of highway robbers.

Little by little the community grew and with its growing it began to assume a general character. The beginning of the sixteenth century found whole villages settled with families, enjoying the protection of the Cossacks, who exacted certain obligations, chiefly military, so that these settlements bore a military character. The sword and the plough were friends which fraternized at every settler's. On the other hand, the gay bachelors began to make depredations across the border to sweep down on Tatars' wives and their daughters and to marry them.

All of Ukraine took on its colour from the Cossack, and if I have drawn largely on Gogol's own account of the origins of this race, it was because it seemed to me that Gogol's emphasis on the heroic rather than on the historical would give the reader a proper approach to the mood in which he created *Taras Bulba*, the finest epic in Russian literature. Gogol never wrote either his history of Little Russia or his universal history. Apart from several brief studies, not always reliable, the net result of his many years' application to his scholarly projects was this brief epic in prose, Homeric in mood. Into this short work he poured all his love of the heroic, all his romanticism, all his poetry, all his joy.

Yet *Taras Bulba* was in a sense an accident, just as many other works of great men are accidents. It often requires a happy combination of circumstances to produce a masterpiece. Just as *Dead Souls* might never have been written if *Don Quixote* had not existed, so there is every reason to believe that *Taras Bulba* could not have been written without the *Odyssey*. Once more ancient fire gave life to new beauty. And yet at the time Gogol could not have had more than a smattering of the *Odyssey*. The magnificent translation made by his friend Zhukovsky had not yet appeared and Gogol, in spite of his ambition to become an historian, was not equipped as a scholar. But it is evident from his dithyrambic letter on the appearance of Zhukovsky's version, forming one of the famous series of letters known as *Correspondence with Friends*, that he was better acquainted with the spirit of Homer than any mere scholar could be. Is not the *Odyssey*, he asks, in every sense a deep reproach to our nineteenth century?

An understanding of Gogol's point of view gives the key to *Taras Bulba*. For in this panoramic canvas of the *Setch*, the military brotherhood of the Cossacks, living under open skies, picturesquely

and heroically, he has drawn a picture of his romantic ideal, which if far from perfect at any rate seemed to him preferable to the grey tedium of a city peopled with government officials.

JOHN COURNOS.

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TARAS BULBA

I

"TURN round, my boy! How ridiculous you look! What sort of a priest's cassock have you got on? Does everybody at the academy dress like that?"

With such words did old Bulba greet his two sons, who had been absent for their education at the Royal Seminary of Kief, and had now returned home to their father.

His sons had but just dismounted from their horses. They were a couple of stout lads who still looked bashful, as became youths recently released from the seminary. Their firm healthy faces were covered with the first down of manhood, down which had, as yet, never known a razor. They were greatly discomfited by such a reception from their father, and stood motionless with eyes fixed upon the ground.

"Stand still, stand still! let me have a good look at you," he continued, turning them round. "How long your gaberdines are! What gaberdines! There never were such gaberdines in the world before. Just run, one of you! I want to see whether you will not get entangled in the skirts, and fall down."

"Don't laugh, don't laugh, father!" said the eldest lad at length.

"How touchy we are! Why shouldn't I laugh?"

"Because, although you are my father, if you laugh, by heavens, I will strike you!"

"What kind of a son are you? what, strike your father!" exclaimed Taras Bulba, retreating several paces in amazement.

"Yes, even my father. I don't stop to consider persons when an insult is in question."

"So you want to fight me? with your fist, eh?"

"Any way."

"Well, let it be fisticuffs," said Taras Bulba, turning up his sleeves. "I'll see what sort of a man you are with your fists."

And father and son, in lieu of a pleasant greeting after long separation, began to deal each other heavy blows on ribs, back, and chest, now retreating and looking at each other, now attacking afresh.

"Look, good people! the old man has gone mad! he has lost his senses completely!" screamed their pale, ugly, kindly mother, who was standing on the threshold, and had not yet succeeded in embracing her darling children. "The children have come home, we have not seen them for over a year; and now he has taken some strange freak—he's pommelling them."

"Yes, he fights well," said Bulba, pausing; "well, by heavens!" he continued, rather as if excusing himself, "although he has never tried his hand at it before, he will make a good Cossack! Now, welcome, son! embrace me," and father and son began to kiss each other. "Good lad! see that you hit every one as you pommelled me; don't let any one escape. Nevertheless your clothes are ridiculous all the same. What rope is this hanging here?—And you, you lout, why are you standing there with your hands hanging beside you?" he added, turning to the youngest. "Why don't you fight me? you son of a dog!"

"What an idea!" said the mother, who had managed in the meantime to embrace her youngest. "Who ever heard of children fighting their own father? That's enough for the present; the child is young, he has had a long journey, he is tired." The child was over twenty, and about six feet high. "He ought to rest, and eat something; and you set him to fighting!"

"You are a gabbler!" said Bulba. "Don't listen to your mother, my lad; she is a woman, and knows

nothing. What sort of petting do you need? A clear field and a good horse, that's the kind of petting for you! And do you see this sword? that's your mother! All the rest people stuff your heads with is rubbish; the academy, books, primers, philosophy, and all that, I spit upon it all!" Here Bulba added a word which is not used in print. "But I'll tell you what is best: I'll take you to Zaporozhe [1] this very week. That's where there's science for you! There's your school; there alone will you gain sense."

"And are they only to remain at home a week?" said the worn old mother sadly and with tears in her eyes. "The poor boys will have no chance of looking around, no chance of getting acquainted with the home where they were born; there will be no chance for me to get a look at them."

"Enough, you've howled quite enough, old woman! A Cossack is not born to run around after women. You would like to hide them both under your petticoat, and sit upon them as a hen sits on eggs. Go, go, and let us have everything there is on the table in a trice. We don't want any dumplings, honey-cakes, poppy-cakes, or any other such messes: give us a whole sheep, a goat, mead forty years old, and as much corn-brandy as possible, not with raisins and all sorts of stuff, but plain scorching corn-brandy, which foams and hisses like mad."

Bulba led his sons into the principal room of the hut; and two pretty servant girls wearing coin necklaces, who were arranging the apartment, ran out quickly. They were either frightened at the arrival of the young men, who did not care to be familiar with any one; or else they merely wanted to keep up their feminine custom of screaming and rushing away headlong at the sight of a man, and then screening their blushes for some time with their sleeves. The hut was furnished according to the fashion of that period—a fashion

[1] The Cossack country beyond (*za*) the falls (*porozhe*) of the Dnieper.

concerning which hints linger only in the songs and lyrics, no longer sung, alas! in the Ukraine as of yore by blind old men, to the soft tinkling of the native guitar, to the people thronging round them—according to the taste of that warlike and troublous time, of leagues and battles prevailing in the Ukraine after the union. Everything was cleanly smeared with coloured clay. On the walls hung sabres, hunting-whips, nets for birds, fishing-nets, guns, elaborately carved powder-horns, gilded bits for horses, and tether-ropes with silver plates. The small window had round dull panes, through which it was impossible to see except by opening the one movable one. Around the windows and doors red bands were painted. On shelves in one corner stood jugs, bottles, and flasks of green and blue glass, carved silver cups, and gilded drinking vessels of various makes—Venetian, Turkish, Tscherkessian, which had reached Bulba's cabin by various roads, at third and fourth hand, a thing common enough in those bold days. There were birch-wood benches all around the room, a huge table under the holy pictures in one corner, and a huge stove covered with parti-coloured patterns in relief, with spaces between it and the wall. All this was quite familiar to the two young men, who were wont to come home every year during the dog-days, since they had no horses, and it was not customary to allow students to ride afield on horseback. The only distinctive things permitted them were long locks of hair on the temples, which every Cossack who bore weapons was entitled to pull. It was only at the end of their course of study that Bulba had sent them a couple of young stallions from his stud.

Bulba, on the occasion of his sons' arrival, ordered all the sotniks or captains of hundreds, and all the officers of the band who were of any consequence, to be summoned; and when two of them arrived with his old comrade, the Osaul or sub-chief, Dmitro Tovkatch, he immediately presented the lads, saying, "See what fine young fellows they are! I shall send them to the

Setch [1] shortly." The guests congratulated Bulba and the young men, telling them they would do well and that there was no better knowledge for a young man than a knowledge of that same Zaporozhian Setch.

" Come, brothers, seat yourselves, each where he likes best, at the table; come, my sons. First of all, let's take some corn-brandy," said Bulba. " God bless you! Welcome, lads; you, Ostap, and you, Andríi. God grant that you may always be successful in war, that you may beat the Mussulmans and the Turks and the Tatars; and that when the Poles undertake any expedition against our faith, you may beat the Poles. Come, clink your glasses. How now? Is the brandy good? What's corn-brandy in Latin? The Latins were stupid: they did not know there was such a thing in the world as corn-brandy. What was the name of the man who wrote Latin verses? I don't know much about reading and writing, so I don't quite know. Wasn't it Horace? "

" What a dad! " thought the elder son Ostap. " The old dog knows everything, but he always pretends the contrary."

" I don't believe the archimandrite allowed you so much as a smell of corn-brandy," continued Taras. " Confess, my boys, they thrashed you well with fresh birch-twigs on your backs and all over your Cossack bodies; and perhaps, when you grew too sharp, they beat you with whips. And not on Saturday only, I fancy, but on Wednesday and Thursday."

" What is past, father, need not be recalled; it is done with."

" Let them try it now," said Andríi. " Let anybody just touch me, let any Tatar risk it now, and he'll soon learn what a Cossack's sword is like! "

" Good, my son, by heavens, good! And when it comes to that, I'll go with you; by heavens, I'll go too! What should I wait here for? To become a buckwheat-

[1] The village or, rather, permanent camp of the Zaporozhian Cossacks.

reaper and housekeeper, to look after the sheep and swine, and loaf around with my wife? Away with such nonsense! I am a Cossack; I'll have none of it! What's left but war? I'll go with you to Zaporozhe to carouse; I'll go, by heavens!" And old Bulba, growing warm by degrees and finally quite angry, rose from the table, and, assuming a dignified attitude, stamped his foot. "We will go to-morrow! Wherefore delay? What enemy can we besiege here? What is this hut to us? What do we want with all these things? What are pots and pans to us?" So saying, he began to knock over the pots and flasks, and to throw them about.

The poor old woman, well used to such freaks on the part of her husband, looked sadly on from her seat on the wall-bench. She did not dare say a word; but when she heard the decision which was so terrible for her, she could not refrain from tears. As she looked at her children, from whom so speedy a separation was threatened, it is impossible to describe the full force of her speechless grief, which seemed to quiver in her eyes and on her lips convulsively pressed together.

Bulba was terribly headstrong. He was one of those characters which could only exist in that fierce fifteenth century, and in that half-nomadic corner of Europe, when the whole of Southern Russia, deserted by its princes, was laid waste and burned to the quick by pitiless troops of Mongolian robbers; when men deprived of house and home grew brave there; when, amid conflagrations, threatening neighbours, and eternal terrors, they settled down, and growing accustomed to looking these things straight in the face, trained themselves not to know that there was such a thing as fear in the world; when the old, peaceable Slav spirit was fired with warlike flame, and the Cossack state was instituted—a free, wild outbreak of Russian nature—and when all the river-banks, fords, and like suitable places were peopled by Cossacks, whose number no man knew. Their bold comrades had a right to reply to the Sultan when he asked how many they were,

"Who knows? We are scattered all over the steppes: wherever there is a hillock, there is a Cossack."

It was, in fact, a most remarkable exhibition of Russian strength, forced by dire necessity from the bosom of the people. In place of the original provinces with their petty towns, in place of the warring and bartering petty princes ruling in their cities, there arose great colonies, kuréns,[1] and districts, bound together by one common danger and hatred against the heathen robbers. The story is well known how their incessant warfare and restless existence saved Europe from the merciless hordes which threatened to overwhelm her. The Polish kings, who now found themselves sovereigns, in place of the provincial princes, over these extensive tracts of territory, fully understood, despite the weakness and remoteness of their own rule, the value of the Cossacks, and the advantages of the warlike, untrammelled life led by them. They encouraged them and flattered this disposition of mind. Under their distant rule, the hetmans or chiefs, chosen from among the Cossacks themselves, redistributed the territory into military districts. It was not a standing army, no one saw it; but in case of war and general uprising, it required a week, and no more, for every man to appear on horseback, fully armed, receiving only one ducat from the king; and in two weeks such a force had assembled as no recruiting officers would ever have been able to collect. When the expedition was ended, the army dispersed among the fields and meadows and the fords of the Dnieper; each man fished, wrought at his trade, brewed his beer, and was once more a free Cossack. Their foreign contemporaries rightly marvelled at their wonderful qualities. There was no handicraft which the Cossack was not expert at: he could distil brandy, build a waggon, make powder, and do blacksmith's and gunsmith's work, in addition to committing wild excesses, drinking and carousing as only a Russian can—all this he was equal to. Besides

[1] Cossack villages. In the Setch, a large wooden barrack.

the registered Cossacks, who considered themselves bound to appear in arms in time of war, it was possible to collect at any time, in case of dire need, a whole army of volunteers. All that was required was for the Osaul or sub-chief to traverse the market-places and squares of the villages and hamlets, and shout at the top of his voice, as he stood in his waggon, "Hey, you distillers and beer-brewers! you have brewed enough beer, and lolled on your stoves, and stuffed your fat carcasses with flour, long enough! Rise, win glory and warlike honours! You ploughmen, you reapers of buckwheat, you tenders of sheep, you danglers after women, enough of following the plough, and soiling your yellow shoes in the earth, and courting women, and wasting your warlike strength! The hour has come to win glory for the Cossacks!" These words were like sparks falling on dry wood. The husbandman broke his plough; the brewers and distillers threw away their casks and destroyed their barrels; the mechanics and merchants sent their trade and their shop to the devil, broke the pots and everything else in their homes, and mounted their horses. In short, the Russian character here received a profound development, and manifested a powerful outward expression.

Taras was one of the band of old-fashioned leaders; he was born for warlike emotions, and was distinguished for his uprightness of character. At that epoch the influence of Poland had already begun to make itself felt upon the Russian nobility. Many had adopted Polish customs, and began to display luxury in splendid staffs of servants, hawks, huntsmen, dinners, and palaces. This was not to Taras's taste. He liked the simple life of the Cossacks, and quarrelled with those of his comrades who were inclined to the Warsaw party, calling them serfs of the Polish nobles. Ever on the alert, he regarded himself as the legal protector of the orthodox faith. He entered despotically into any village where there was a general complaint of oppression by the revenue farmers and of the addition of fresh