

THE STEPS OF SATURN

An Autobiographical Novel

by



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Introduction

When Saturn takes a step, time lapses. The longer the step, the greater the laps. When Saturn steps lightly people are prosperous. It's a time of peace. When Saturn takes long, hard crushing steps people are thrown into turmoil, crisis and upheaval. When Saturn's steps smash down hard mankind's suffering becomes grave: wars, strikes, hunger, millions die, towns and cities are destroyed and darkness shrouds the earth.

It seemed strange that while millions perished in Imperial Russia in the early years of the twentieth century, a slight built, gray-eyed boy was tossed from one peril to another. Perhaps he alone survived because he was a Scorpio, and as such was a son of Saturn.

Zuka (Sergei Petrovich Belov) had always been the favorite of children, horses, and females. "If you know how to handle children, you know how to handle horses and if you know how to handle horses, you know how to handle women, with a gentle but strong hand."

Nobody can handle Saturn. He is completely incomprehensible to the understanding of mere humans.

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Chapter 1

The Big House

In a far off corner of the Russian Empire, on the outskirts of Samara Province, everyone on the state of old Barin Matthew Ossinin was busy with the harvest. In July, 1906, the harvest was good. The golden sea of wheat stretched into the blue immensity of the sky. Ah, July, the time of harvest! Glorious days full of sunshine, flowers and bees when the sweet smell of buckwheat mixes with the finest perfume of the earth, the field and the forests.

In the morning the sun rose majestically. First red, big and mild; then bright, hot and angry. Much earlier, a long line of reapers had appeared before the golden wall. At a signal from the lead man, hundreds of long bladed scythes plunged into the golden bosom of wheat. Slowly, step by step, the orderly line advanced against the waving wheat. From time to time the line stopped, the men wiped their faces, sharpened their scythes and again inexorably pushed forward. Behind them lay long rows of the rich harvest.

The reapers were tall, sinewy men in home-spun shirts and baggy pants. Shirts tucked into their pants identified them as Tartars, the descendants of the once proud hordes of the Great Ghengis Khan. True Russians wore their shirts over their pants.

Behind this grim, silent line in which the men worked with singleness of purpose, and in contrast to it, advanced another line. The second line was full of noise, color, laughter and life. The Tartar girls in white blouses embroidered with red, blue and green, with their long black tresses adorned with silver coins and ribbons, were having the time of their lives. During the harvest the girls could abandon their annoying veils, the “chadras.” They were glad to show their smiling faces and to dazzle their admirers with broad smiles and perfectly blackened teeth. It was considered highly attractive for a Tartar girl to have teeth as black as possible.

The sun was too hot, the work too important and Allah the merciful would overlook the slight breach of the Koran. He would not punish the girls for discarding their chadras during the harvest. The girls deftly gathered the wheat into small heaps using long-handled rakes.

The third line, consisting of the married women was more restrained but still gay. They made bigger heaps as they prepared the golden wheat for the threshing house.

Barin Sergei Petrovich Ossinin also liked the harvest. He considered himself a part of it and a very important part at that. He also liked the Tartar girls. He liked their throaty but pleasant voices, their laughter floating over the fields, the swishing sound of scythes and the general hustle and bustle all over the estate. His mischievous grey eyes were always looking for trouble and somehow always finding it; often much more than he could handle. But experience in his case was a poor teacher; it seemed never to save him for the next predicament. He was a favorite of the Tartar girls. They liked his roguish eyes, and he collected more smiles from them

than anyone else.

The Ossinin Family

Barin Sergei Petrovich was the second and last of the family and Mama's darling. Actually no one called him "Barin" yet. He was simply "Zuka," as he had been named by his elder brother Matthew when his mother had presented the baby brother. Mother had said: "Here is your brother, Sereja." Matthew Ossinin thoughtfully listened to his mother and magnanimously offered his most precious possession—the nipple: "Zuka, take it," he said. So had originated the name "Zuka" and so began their friendship.

Matthew was fifteen months older than Zuka. He had steady brown eyes, round and bold as an eagle's, and beautiful black unruly curls. These brothers were very different from one another. The difference could probably be accounted for in that Zuka was born in November – under the sign of Scorpio. Born under this sign are the restless, the peripatetic, the adventurous. Trouble is their middle name. Matthew was an illustrious Aries—a man of authority, masterful, steady. He was also Papa's boy. He was the first-born male in the family and in accordance with tradition, had been named after his Grandfather.

At this time the Ossinin family consisted of old Barin Matthew, and his two married sons Leonid and Peter and their families. Leonid, the elder brother, had two daughters. Peter, the younger brother had two sons: Matthew and Zuka.

Old Barin Matthew Ossinin possessed a sizable estate "Ivanovka" near his home town of Bougoulma. It was occupied by Leonid and his family. Another much bigger estate, "Malinovka" was about forty miles from Bougoulma. The Ossinins had an interest in a third estate, "Soumorokovo," which they owned jointly with their relatives, the Rostovskys. The old Barin also owned several houses in town. His own manor was located at "Ossinin's Spring" on the outskirts of town. This was the ancestral home of the Ossinin family. It's name was derived from a crystal clear spring that bubbled up from beneath the hill.

The Boyars

Tradition had it that the appearance of the Ossinin family in this part of the Empire had not been entirely voluntary. The whole thing started when a Boyar, Nikita Ossinin by name, had a disagreement with Tzar Peter, later known as "Peter the Great." The disagreement was over certain irregularities in Nikita Ossinin's administration as governor of the Rostov province. Actually it was not so much as question of "irregularities" as inherited hostilities that had gone on for centuries between the upstart Romanovs and Nikita's Boyar ancestors. Nikita descended from Viking Prince Rurik who founded Russia in 862. Rurik's descendents ruled until 1598 when Tzar Theodor I, died without an heir. The period following his death became known as the "time of troubles." Russia was torn by civil war and mired in political intrigue and confusion.

Two powerful nobles, Prince Troubetskoy and Prince Pojarsky, emerged. Prince Troubetskoy led the unruly Cossacks. Prince Pojarsky was popular because he had liberated the capitol from the Poles. Both claimed the throne. The peasant revolts worsened and the government was on the verge of collapse. So the two princes struck a deal. Both would withdraw in favor of a compromise candidate in the person of Michael Romanov. Michael was not even a Boyar. His only claim to the throne was that his relative, a Romanov girl who had been the wife of Tzar Ivan the Strict; *later called "The Terrible" by western historians*. Both princes expected to get rid of Michael and elect a more suitable candidate when the time of trouble was over. But fortune smiled on the Romanovs and in one magnificent stride, Saturn saddled Russia with the ill-fated dynasty.

Banished

Tzar Peter accused Governor Nikita Ossinin of being so engrossed in the cultivation of his long silky beard that he had forgotten to cultivate his province. The long, silky and much cherished beards were the pride of the Russian Boyars but a very sore spot with Tzar Peter. He insisted that all his noblemen be clean shaven like the rest of Europe. Somehow Peter associated these long beards with all the evils and problems of Russian society and he said this to his Boyars, in no uncertain terms.

So in dealing with Nikita Ossinin, he order the offending beard to be shaven off. At that, Boyarin Nikita respectfully but stubbornly informed his Tzar: "That he, Tzar Peter, the Tzar of the Great, Small and White Russias, the Tzar of Kazan, etc., etc., was the master of his, Boyarin Nitita Ossinin's life and could dispose of it as he liked; but that he, Boyarin Nikita Petrovich Ossinin, was the master of his own beard, and as such, he was not going to part with it."

Tzar Peter, almost seven feet tall, was well known for his shortness of temper and promptness of his action. Immediately and personally, he sheared off the disputed beard and "strongly advised" Boyarin Nikita Petrovich Ossinin to go over to the Volga River district (the outpost of civilization at the time) and to stay there permanently. To ignore the "advice" of Tzar Peter was definitely unhealthy and so Boyarin Ossinin gathered his family, his domestics and his possessions and follow the advice of his Tzar.

Volga River District

At the time he arrived (sometime between 1698 - 1701) the district between the Volga River and the Ural mountains with its gently sloping hills, forests, many rivers, streams and fertile plains was a rich "no man's land." The few scattered settlements had inadequate protection against many roving bands of lawless criminals. Those who suffered the most were the Tartars who inhabited the area.

Nearly seven hundred years earlier, their ancestors, the mighty armies of the Great Khan had swept over Russia, sacked a good part of Europe, and had returned to found the state of the

“Golden Horde” in this fertile region. For two hundred years Russian emigrants to the region lived under the “Tartar Yoke.” Finally the Grand Dukes of Russia, through a successive line of splendid leaders and rulers of Rurik descent, had gradually defeated, conquered and subjugated the Tartars. After the downfall of the “Golden Horde” in the middle of the 16th Century, the Rurik dynasty came to an end. The new Tzars of Russia were too busy with important affairs in other parts of the realm to pay much attention to this recently conquered province.

Thus it was that in 1700 the land in the Volga River district was free for the taking. “Come and get it if you can hold it!” was the motto of that day. So it happened that Nikita Ossinin, after a bit of wandering here and there, found a place to suit his fancy, a good place with broad acres of fertile land, well forested and irrigated. Here he settled near a Tartar village which later became the town of Bougoulma, Samara Province. In time this district acquired more settlers. Many had come voluntarily simply looking for more elbow room. Others were escaped convicts from Siberia. With the establishment of law and increased security for the inhabitants, this region became one of the richest parts of the Russian Empire.

Grandfather

The present old Barin Matthew Ossinin was born in 1833, the eldest of three brothers and three sisters. As was fashionable, he embarked on a military career as one of his majesty’s Lancers, but his military career was cut short by the death of his Sire. He had to resign his regiment in order to become the head of the family and the master of a heavily mortgaged estate, deep in debt with practically no cash.

His Sire had been quite an eccentric gentleman, who after a pretty riotous life here, there and abroad, suddenly turned religious, dropped the administration of his already decaying property and retired to a birch grove. There, in a log cabin, he prayed for the exculpation of his sin—inherited, acquired and committed. Was he successful in saving his soul? It is difficult to say, but he certainly lost much of his family fortune. At the time of his demise the situation was quite desperate.

Matthew Ossinin found himself in a difficult position but had good fortune on two counts. First he had married a fellow officer’s sister. She was his guardian angel and life-long partner. Secondly, in retiring from his regiment he took with him his sergeant, a man of about equal size and similar character. This sergeant, Stephan Dmitrievitch, watched over his Barin’s interests for nearly half a century, and with his practical mind helped to regain the family fortune.

According to the rules of gentry, a Russian nobleman, finding himself in impoverished conditions had to rusticate quietly and gracefully into retirement. Matthew Ossinin was six feet four inches tall, young and strong, and he did not want to rusticate quietly, gracefully or otherwise. With the aid of his wife’s dowry and his faithful sergeant, he organized an export-import company and by fair and square dealings with the Tartars, gained their confidence, esteem and trade. With new found cash he restored the badly decaying estate. He hired agricultural

experts, procured new machinery and replenished the stock. When the estate was finally in good order, he liquidated his commercial enterprises. He then turned over his oil refining factory to his brother Paul; set up brother Andrew in Ufa; married his sisters off well and then concentrated all his time and energy on the administration of his estates.

He ruled everything and everyone with an iron hand in a velvet glove, though upon occasion, he would remove the glove. His firm control was respected just as much as the straight forwardness of his character. As time passed, he became mildly despotic and given to displays of temper. Prudent people made themselves scare on such occasions. After the death of his beloved wife, his natural eccentricities grew to such an extent that they became legendry in Samara Province. But no man who came to Barin Ossinin for help went away empty handed. Nor would the Barin rest until he had righted an injustice. He neither punished without reason nor allowed the guilty to go free.

With his sons and daughter married, he abandoned his spacious town house for a comfortable cottage where he spent the remaining years of his life with his devoted sergeant. He never interfered in the lives of his married children. He gave advice only when it was asked for.

Bougoulma

At the end of the last century, Bougoulma had poor communications with the outside world. The city of Samara was about two hundred miles away and the journey to that city was quite an enterprise, involving days of preparation and travel. Life was dull, the landed Gentry were only a small group and time, particularly in winter, hung heavy on their hands. The Autumn Fair was the one big event in the community. After this brief period of gaiety the town would simply slip into a deep slumber until the ice broke the following spring.

Bougoulma had a municipal council, a chief of police, a few policemen, a crown judge and no secrets at all. During the last twenty-five years there had been only one murder, a romantic one of the usual kind. This had been a milestone of local interest. Outside the town, the region was populated mostly by Tartars with a few Russian villages scattered randomly about.

The Tartars were different from the people of central Russia. This difference could be attributed to their culture as well as their past. The Tartars had never been serfs, nor had they ever become embittered against Russia's noble class. They were a proud, loyal and industrious people. They were followers of Mohammed and as such, practiced polygamy. Consequently they enjoyed a happy harmonious family life. They believed that Allah, in creating the world, had made women to be mothers. Mohammed conferred upon all women the natural and undeniable rights of motherhood. He further decreed that all should enjoy the respect and glory due them in fulfilling this sacred calling.

There were always many girls who, due to the lack of a dowry or personal charm, had no

opportunity to become first wives. But why deny them the opportunity to become second, third or fourth wives and consequently mothers? The Moslem religion guaranteed them such rights and privileges. The girls themselves much preferred to be wives, even a second or third wife, rather than not to marry at all. They preferred their own homes even if the home had to be shared, to becoming embittered old spinsters, the barren shells of womanhood. The competition among the wives also played an important part in domestic efficiency and in the comfort of the husband. So the Tartars practiced polygamy and consequently were blessed with peaceful and happy homes. It was a pleasure to visit a Tartar village, to see their prosperity, cleanliness and order in every household.

The Big House

In the year 1906, Zuka and his family were visiting his grandfather Matthew at his estate "Malinovka." They were staying in the Big House. The construction of the house was fantastic. The monstrosity had been designed and executed by another Matthew Ossinin, the grandfather of the present one. It had been built when serf labor cost nothing, when time meant nothing, and when any amount of construction material was available. In designing the house, the earlier Matthew Ossinin had obviously suffered from "mania grandiose," unfortunately complicated by a lack of knowledge of architecture.

The house had an immense facade with the inevitable row of columns, base-relief molding and a grand stairway. It had two wings with a kitchen in each. The house was cold, incongruous and gloomy. Only two rooms occupied the immense front of this enormous structure. They were so huge that it was impossible to heat or furnish them, so they remained unfurnished, unheated and unused. Each wing had rooms of more or less human proportions. A large park graced the front of the house. The stables and living quarters for the staff were located behind the house. Old Barin Matthew never liked the Big House and he never lived there. He built a cozy, warm and comfortable cottage just behind the big house which he occupied with his faithful servant.

Catherine Ossinin and her two sons, Matthew and Zuka had settled into one of the wings of the Big House. As Peter Ossinin was away in St. Petersburg, Old Barin Matthew had assumed responsibility for the comfort and welfare of his favorite son's wife and for his two grand children. He had a peculiar way of expressing his concern and showing his respect. Every morning old sergeant Stephan Dmitrievich would appear at the Big House and through a chamber maid, he would request to be "presented to the Barina." The "presence" granted, he would be ushered ceremoniously into the "Morning Room" to deliver his message: "Barin would like to know how the Barina feels, and if the Barina and the children had a pleasant and restful night?" To this Catherine Ossinin would invariably answer: "Thank the Barin for his concern, please, and inform him that the Barina and the children had a restful night and are in good health."

A few minutes after his dignified exit, the Barina's chambermaid would sally forth on a similar mission and ask to be "presented to the Barin." The "presence" granted, she would

deliver her message: “Compliments from the Barina.” She would like to know if the Barin had a restful night and if he is in good health?” Barin Matthew would respond: “Thank the Barina and inform her that the Barin is in good health and has passed a restful night.” The chambermaid would then leave with an appropriate curtsy and the “morning ceremony” would be over, to be repeated on the morrow.

The Troika

The old Barin came for lunch every day at one o’clock and this too he did in his own way. Exactly half an hour before lunch time there would be activity at the stables. The “troika” had to be made ready for the old Barin. The troika requires some explanation for it was an important institution in imperial Russia. “Troika” means three horses harnessed abreast to a carriage. Between the thills a powerful trotter was harnessed with a “dooga” (or wooden bow-shaft) over her head. The “dooga” was attached to both thills and to a collar around the horse’s neck. On either side of the lead horse, side horses were harnessed straight to the carriage. These side horses had to be perfectly matched. They also wore leather collars around their necks, adorned with many round silver bells, while their manes and tails were interwoven with multicolored ribbons. When the troika traveled at full speed, it was a magnificent sight to behold with the side horses covering the ground at a maddening gallop and the powerful trotter going high, wide and handsome as the silver bells rang gaily. The troika was beautiful in its power and grace. Racing troikas was a favorite sport in Imperial Russia. A good troika was the pride of any family.



No wonder there was commotion at the stable in “turning out the troika” for the old Barin, and woe to the stable hand should the smallest detail not be exactly right! When the troika was ready the Head Coachman, “Red John,” obviously named for his flaming hair, would take the reins. In his day “Red John” was the best coachman, the best driver, and coincidentally, one of the greatest consumers of Vodka in the Province. Generally, John handled the troika expertly, but he outdid even himself when not exactly sober. On occasion John would fortify himself considerably with Vodka and his horses as well. Then the galloping horses of the Apocalypse could not have matched him.

But for trips to the Big House, John would refrain, as much as possible, from the bottle. He had known his Barin for many years and understood what was expected. At least, it was certain that the horses were sober on these trips. John was a very imposing figure in his velveteen coachman’s coat. A round hat with peacock feather adorned his flaming head at a rakish angle. The old Barin would walk slowly to the waiting troika when he was ready to leave. When he was well satisfied that the troika was properly turned out, he would step on the running board, which groaned under his weight. He would climb in and settle himself comfortably in the leather seat.

“Are you ready, Barin?” Sergeant Stephan Dmitrievich would ask.

“Yes, Stephan, all is well and I am ready.”

Old Stephan would not allow his Barin to depart without his personal supervision. The habits of half a century were too strong in him.

“All right John, proceed with God’s speed and be careful!” the old man would call out.

“Yes, Stephan Dmitrievich!” John would answer and then, with an imperceptible pressure of his hands, the troika would glide over the green grass of the yard. On the highway John would give the horses a little more head. The old Barin would lean back comfortably against the cushioned seat. He liked the feel of the fresh breeze on his face. He liked the jingle of the silver bells. He enjoyed the soothing swing of the carriage. John then turned a corner and guided the dancing troika back through the open gate into the park. The troika would approach the Big House with its bells singing merrily. John would stop the carriage smoothly at just the right spot. At the top of the stairway Barina and the children with her chambermaid would be waiting. At the bottom of the stairs, two footmen were ready to help the old Barin embark.

“Thanks, my lads! I can still get out by myself,” Grandfather would say, waving the men aside. Actually, old Matthew Ossinin had come back to within a few yards of from whence he departed. But in his mind, to call on his beloved daughter-in-law on foot through a side door into the Big House would have been most disrespectful. After all, the Barina was the daughter of his life-long friend and the mother of his only grandsons. So each and every day the best troika was turned out and each and every day the old Barin formally visited the family of his second son.

Family Traditions

Slowly the Barin mounted the long stairway. As he reached the top he would bow to kiss the Barina's extended hand. Catherine Ossinin, synchronizing her motions perfectly, would kiss his forehead at the same moment his lips touched her hand. The fact that he had known her all her life, that he still remembered her as a baby, as an awkward teen-ager, as a young girl and a young lady did not make any difference. Now she was the wife of his second son and the mother of his grandchildren and as such she deserved proper respect.

Grandfather then greeted his grandsons and inquired about their comfort and welfare. Catherine Ossinin would thank her father-in-law for his care and attention. The Barin would offer her his hand. She would rest her fingers lightly on his elbow and the procession would begin. The old Barin and the Barina led the party. Their children came next. The chambermaid followed with the two footmen bringing up the rear. They proceeded through the big, nearly empty front rooms of the house until they reached the smaller dining room. The Barin always seated the Barina. He then took his place at her right. The children settled into their places and lunch would begin. It was a long, leisurely lunch which included ham and eggs, chicken salad, and pancakes with honey.

When lunch was over, the visitor was escorted back to the waiting troika and grandfather would return to his house. Again he departed as he had come, through the front gate, through the park down to the highway and finally back through the gate and to his own cottage.

Some evenings, the children dined alone with grandfather. On these occasions the same troika would await them and bring them to the cottage. Grandfather's small house was comfortable, simple and neat. It was the home of an old man who had lived his life; a man of few wants.

After dinner the children were encouraged to share their adventures. Grandfather was normally not a very talkative man but these were times when he did not mind offering his opinions. He was very much opposed to two kinds of men—socialists, who had recently appeared in the district and teetotalers (a person who never drinks alcoholic liquor.) He considered both oddities and harmful. Grandfather's opinions like his life, were very unorthodox. The children often coaxed old Sergeant Stephen to tell them stories about his own military campaigns and how he got his stripes. The old soldier loved to reminisce about military life, about the period when he and the old Barin were dashing young Lancers in the service of Tzar Nicolas the First.

The Harvest

Needless to say Zuka enjoyed the life at "Malinovka." He was very proud to be taking part in the harvest. He checked in with the superintendent each morning and he checked out in the evening. On Saturday he stood in line to get his pay. He liked to talk "shop" with his grandfather. They would sit and visit outside the threshing house; just two seasoned old hands--

knowledgeable and experienced in harvest of wheat.



On one particular morning, Zuka proceeded to his team of horses. He deliberately made his way along the line of working Tartar girls. He had chosen this course because of the friendly greetings, smiles and jokes that were always directed toward him. He checked in with the superintendent and then went to drive his team which consisted of two wagons and two horses. The lead horse was an old mare with the poetic name of “Golubka,” or “Little Dove.” The Dove was a quadruped philosopher with the idea that every motion was harmful to her health and should be avoided. She attempted to live up to this philosophy by moving very slowly. Actually she was a very wise old mare that required no driver. She knew the road to the threshing house and back by heart. It was common knowledge that she would deliver the team safely and punctually which is why Zuka had been assigned to drive her wagon.

The second horse had been tethered to the rear top railing of the first wagon. This horse was young and restless, so the tether was short and extra strong. Zuka’s job was to go from one pile of wheat to the next until the wagons were loaded to full capacity. The sheaves of wheat were piled high above the frame so when the wagons were finally loaded, the driver had to dig himself a perch at the front of the first wagon, right over the railing. When loaded, the team would slowly make their way to the threshing house. This morning Zuka and his team were doing nicely. So he had become overconfident and much too nonchalant. On this trip he failed to secure proper seating and started toward the threshing house precariously perched on the rail. He was dangling his feet while he urged the mare to a faster gait which naturally, was hopeless. “Little Dove,” paid not the slightest attention.

All went well until they reached a small oak grove where the road became bumpy because of the exposed roots of the oak trees. Running up against one of these roots, the wagon bumped unexpectedly and Zuka lost his balance and dove head first into the dust of the road. He landed squarely in the middle of the ruts between the thills. The horse’s hoof only slightly grazed his head. He was in an extremely dangerous position. In this moment of dire peril, some unknown force took control of his mind and he acted in accordance with its sharp, exact and urgent orders: first to flatten himself to the ground to avoid the iron shaft of the axle. The shaft was sharp and missed him only by a hair’s breath. Slowly the wagon moved on. Zuka could see the boards of the wagon bed above him. A sudden thought flashed through his mind—the rear horse! That young and spirited horse! As soon as the first wagon had passed over him the horse would rear and struggle. Zuka would be crushed either by the horse or by the second heavy wagon.

He had to get out and right now! His mind worked calmly, clearly and fast. His only chance was to roll out between the front and rear wheels. The wagon was nearly halfway over him. With one swift motion he doubled himself up; with another he set his body rolling sideways. In an instant he was out. The rear wheels missed his legs by a fraction of an inch.

With trembling limbs Zuka stood up wobbling on rubber legs. He burst into tears. The wagons were moving on. His first impulse was to run home to mama, but the sight of the team moving away sobered him. If the team should arrive at the threshing house without him it would cause considerable commotion. His mistake would be discovered and he would not be allowed to take any further part in the harvest. Zuka hesitated only a moment; then still sobbing from fright, he ran after the wagons. Reaching them, he stopped the horses and climbed back up to the top of the sheaves. This time he was careful to secured a proper seat. Zuka once again took up the reins, called to the horses and the wagons rolled slowly forward.