

MARIA BOTCHKAREVA, PEASANT, SOLDIER AND PATRIOT, MAY PROVE TO RUSSIA WHAT JOAN OF ARC IS TO FRANCE

Life Story of Woman Proves a History of the Revolution and Appalling After-Effects—Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst, Noted English Suffragist, Speaks of Her as the Greatest Woman of the Century and Gives Reasons

Russia, Inchoate, Invincible, Agonized, Striving, Rising Colossus, Has Its Incarnation in Botchkareva—Besought All Freemen to Liberate Her Beloved Country From the Galling Yoke of the Invading Germans

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INTRODUCTION

IN THE early summer of 1917 the world was thrilled by a news item from Petrograd announcing the formation by one Maria Botchkareva of a women's fighting unit under the name of "The Battalion of Death." With this announcement an obscure Russian peasant girl made her debut in the international hall of fame. From the depths of dark Russia Maria Botchkareva suddenly emerged into the limelight of modern publicity. Foreign correspondents sought her, photographers followed her, distinguished visitors paid their respects to her. All tried to interpret this arresting personality. The result was a riot of misinformation and misunderstanding.

Of the numerous published tales about and interviews with Botchkareva that have come under my observation, there is hardly one which does not contain some false or misleading statement. This is partly due to the deplorable fact that the foreign journalists who interpreted Russian men and affairs to the world during the momentous year of 1917 were, with very few exceptions, ignorant of the Russian language; and partly to Botchkareva's reluctance to take every adventurous stranger into her confidence. It was her cherished dream to have a complete record of her life incorporated in a book some day. This work is the realization of that dream.

To a very considerable extent, therefore, the narrative here unfolded is of the nature of a confession. When in the United States in the summer of 1918, Botchkareva determined to prepare her autobiography. Had she been educated enough to be able to write a letter fluently, she would probably have written her own life-story in Russian and then had it translated into English. Being semi-literate, she found it necessary to secure the services of a writer commanding a knowledge of her native language, which is the only tongue she speaks. The procedure followed in the writing of this book was this: Botchkareva recited to me in Russian the story of her life, and I recorded it in English in longhand, making every effort to set down her narrative verbatim. Not infrequently I would interrupt her with a question intended to draw out some forgotten experiences. However, one of Botchkareva's natural gifts is an extraordinary memory. It took nearly a hundred hours, distributed over a period of three weeks, for her to tell me every detail of her romantic life.

At our first session Botchkareva made it clear that what she was going to tell me would be very different from the yarns credited to her in the press. She would reveal her innermost self and break open for the first time the sealed book of her past. This she did, and in doing so ruined completely several widely circulated tales about her. Perhaps the chief of these is the statement that Botchkareva had enlisted as a soldier and gone to war to avenge her fallen husband. Whether this invention was the product of her own mind or was attributed to her originally by some prolific correspondent, I do not know. In any event it was a handy answer to the eternal question of the pestiferous journalists as to how she came to be a soldier. Unable to explain to the conventional world that profound impulse which really drove her to her remarkable destiny, she adopted this excuse until she had an opportunity to record the full story of her daring life.

This book will also remove that distrustful attitude based on misunderstanding that has been manifested toward Botchkareva in radical circles. When she arrived in the United States she was immediately hailed as a "counter-revolutionary," royalist and sinister intriguer by the extremists. That was a grave injustice to her. She is ignorant of politics, contemptuous of intrigue, and spiritually far above party strife. Her mission in life was to free Russia from the German yoke.

spirit of this phenomenal rustic, a privilege I shall ever esteem as priceless. She not only laid bare before me every detail of her amazing life that memory could resurrect, but also allowed me to explore the nooks and corners of her heart to a degree that no friend of hers ever did. Maintaining a critical attitude from the beginning of our association, I was gradually overwhelmed by the largeness of her soul.

Wherein lies the greatness of Botchkareva? Mrs. Emmeline Pankhurst called her the greatest woman of the century. "The woman that saved France was Joan of Arc—a peasant girl," wrote a correspondent in July, 1917; "Maria Botchkareva is her modern parallel." Indeed, in the annals of history since the days of the Maid of Orleans we encounter no feminine figure equal to Botchkareva. Like Joan of Arc, this Russian peasant girl dedicated her life to her country's cause. If Botchkareva failed—and this is yet problematical, for who will dare forecast the future of Russia?—it would not lessen her greatness. Success in our materialistic age is no measure of true genius.

Like Joan of Arc, Botchkareva is the symbol of her country. Can there be a more striking incarnation of France than that conveyed by the image of Joan of Arc? Botchkareva is an astounding typification of peasant Russia, with all her virtues and vices. Educated to the extent of being able to scribble her own name with difficulty, she is endowed with the genius of logic. Ignorant of history and literature, the natural lucidity of her mind is such as to lead her directly to the very few fundamental truths of life. Religious with all the fervor of her primitive soul, she is tolerant in a fashion befitting a philosopher. Devoted to her country with every fiber of her being, she is free of impassioned partisanship and selfish patriotism. Overflows with gentility and kindness, she is yet capable of savage outbursts and brutal acts. Credulous and trustful as a child, she can be easily incited against people and things. Intrepid and rash as a fighter, her desire to live on occasions was indescribably pathetic. In a word, Botchkareva embodies all those paradoxical characteristics of Russian nature that have made Russia a puzzle to the world. These traits are illustrated in almost every page of this book. Take away from Russia the veneer of western civilization and you behold her incarnation in Botchkareva. Know Botchkareva and you shall know Russia, that inchoate, invincible, agonized, striving, rising Colossus, in all its depth and breadth.

It must be made unmistakably clear here that the motives responsible for this book were purely personal. In its origin this work is exclusively a human document, a record of exuberant life. It was the purpose of Botchkareva and the writer to keep the narrative down to a strict recital of facts. It is really incidental that this record is valuable not only as a biography of startling personality, but as a revelation of certain phases of a momentous period in human history; not only as a human document, but as a historical document as well. Because Botchkareva always has been and still is strictly nonpartisan and because she does not pretend to pass judgment upon events and men, her revelations are of prime importance. The reader gets a picture of Kerensky in action that completely effaces all that has hitherto been said of this tragic but typical product of the Russian intelligentsia. Kornilov, Rodzianko, Lenine and Trotsky and some other outstanding personalities of the Russian revolution appear in these pages exactly as they are in reality.

Not a single book, so far as I know, has appeared yet giving an account of how the Russian army at the front reacted to the revolution. What was the state of mind of the Russian soldier in the trenches which was after all the decisive factor in the developments that followed, during the first eight months of 1917? No history of unshackled Russia will be complete without an answer to this vital question. This book is the first to disclose the actions and emotions of the vast Russian army at the front to the

tremendous issues of the revolution, and is of especial value coming from a veteran peasant soldier of the rank and file.

Perhaps surpassing all else in interest is the horrible picture we get of Bolshevism in action. With the claims of theoretical Bolshevism to establish an order of social equality on earth Botchkareva has no quarrel. She said so to Lenine and Trotsky personally. But then came her experiences with Bolshevism in practice, and there follows a blood-freezing narrative of the rule of mobocracy that will live forever in the memory of the reader.

Botchkareva left the United States toward the end of July, 1918, after having attained the purpose of her visit—an interview with President Wilson. She went to England and thence to Archangel, where she arrived early in September. According to a newspaper dispatch, she caused the following proclamation to be posted in village squares and country churches:

"I am a Russian peasant and soldier. At the request of the soldiers and peasants I went to America and Great Britain to ask these countries for military help for Russia.

"The Allies understand our own misfortunes and I return with the Allied armies, which came only for the purpose of helping to drive out our deadly enemies, the Germans, and not to interfere with our internal affairs. After the war is over the Allied troops will leave Russian soil.

"I, on my own part, request all loyal free sons of Russia, without reference to party, to come together, acting as one with the Allied forces, who, under the Russian flag, come to free Russia from the German yoke and in order to help the free Russian army with all forces, including Russia, to beat the enemy.

"Soldiers and peasants! Remember that only a full, clean sweep of the Germans from our soil can give you the free Russia you long for."

ISAAC DON LEVINE.
New York City, November, 1918.

PART ONE—YOUTH

CHAPTER I

My Childhood of Toil

MY FATHER, Leonti Semenovitch Frolkov, was born into serfdom at Nikoloko, a village in the province of Novgorod, some three hundred versts (a verst is about two-thirds of a mile) north of Moscow. He was fifteen when Alexander II emancipated the serfs in 1861, and remembers that historic event vividly, being fond even now of telling of the days of his boyhood. Impressed into the army in the early seventies, he served during the Russo-Turkish war of 1877-78, and distinguished himself for bravery, receiving several medals. When a soldier he learned to read and write, and was promoted to the rank of sergeant.

Returning home at the end of the war, he passed through Tcharanda, a fishermen's settlement on the shore of a lake, in the county of Kirilov, within forty versts of Nikoloko. No longer dressed as a moujik, military in gait and bearing, with coins jingling in his pocket, he cut quite a figure in the poor hamlet of Tcharanda. There he met my mother, Olga, the eldest daughter of Elizar Nazarev, perhaps the most destitute dweller of the place.

Elizar, with his wife and three daughters, occupied a shabby hut on the sandy shore of the lake. So poor was he that he could not afford to buy a horse to carry his catch to the city, and was compelled to sell it, far below the market price, to a traveling buyer. The income thus derived was not sufficient to keep the family from hunger. Bread was always a luxury in the little cabin. The soil was not tillable. 'Elizar's wife would hire herself to the more prosperous peasants in the vicinity for ten kopecks (a kopeck is normally for a cent) a day to labor from sunrise to sunset. But even this additional money was not always to be had. Then Olga would be sent out to beg for bread in the neighboring villages.

When I was nearly six years old a letter came from father, the first he had written us during the five years of his absence. He had broken his right leg and, as soon as he was able to travel, had started home. My mother wept bitterly at the news, but was glad to hear from father,



Maria Botchkareva as a private soldier

later recall without horror. Starting home with a basketful of bread, collected from several villages, she was fatigued but happy at the success of her errand, and hurried as fast as she could. Her path lay through a forest. Suddenly she heard the howling of a pack of wolves. Olga's heart almost stopped beating. The dreadful sounds drew nearer. Overcome by fright, she fell unconscious to the ground.

When she regained her senses, she found herself alone. The wolves apparently had sniffed her prostrate body and gone their way. Her basket of bread was scattered in all directions, trampled in the mud. Out of breath, and without her precious burden, she arrived home.

It was in such circumstances that my mother grew to be nineteen, and when she attracted the attention of Leonti Frolkov, who was then stepping in Tcharanda on his way home from the war. She was immensely flattered when he courted her. He even bought her a pair of shoes for a present, the first shoes she had ever worn. This captivated the humble Olga completely. She joyously accepted his marriage proposal.

After the wedding the young couple moved to Nikoloko, my father's birthplace, where he had inherited a small tract of land. They tilled it together, and with great difficulty managed to make ends meet. My two elder sisters, Arina and Shura, were born here, increasing the poverty of my parents. My father, about this time, took to drinking, and began to maltreat and beat his wife. He was by nature morose and egotistic. Want was now making him cruel. My mother's life with him became one of misery. She was constantly in tears, always pleading for mercy and praying to God.

I was born in July, 1889, the third girl in the family. At that time many railroads were being built throughout the country. When I was a year old, my father, who had once been stationed at Tsarskoye-Selo, the Czar's residence town near the capital, decided to go to Petrograd to seek work. We were left without money. He wrote no letters. On the brink of starvation, my mother somehow contrived, with the aid of kind neighbors, to keep herself and her children alive.

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whom she had almost given up for dead. In spite of his harshness toward her, she still loved him. I remember how happy my mother was when father arrived, but this happiness did not last long. Poverty and misery cut it short. My father's rigid nature asserted itself again.

Hardly had a year gone by when a fourth child, also a girl, arrived in our family. And there was no bread in the house.

From all parts of our section of the country peasants were migrating that year to Siberia, where the government allowed them large grants of land. My father wanted to go, but mother was opposed to it. However, when our neighbor, Verevkin, who had left some time previous for Siberia, wrote glowingly of the new country, my father made up his mind to go, too.

Most of the men would go alone, obtain grants of lands till them, build homesteads, and then return for their families. Those of the peasants who took their families with them had enough money to tide them over. But we were so poor that by the time we got to Tchelebinsk, the last terminal in European Russia, and the government distribution point, we had not a penny left. At the station my father obtained some hot water to make tea, while my two elder sisters were sent to beg for bread.

We were assigned to Kuskovo, a hundred and twenty versts beyond Tomsk. At every station my sisters would beg food, while father filled our tea-kettle with hot water. Thus we got along till Tomsk was reached. Our grant of land was in the midst of the taiga, the virgin Siberian forest. There could be no thought of immediately settling on it, so my father remained in Tomsk, while the rest of us were sent on to Kuskovo. My sisters went to work for board and clothing. My mother, still strong and in good health, baked bread for a living, while I took care of the baby.

One day my mother was expecting visitors. She had baked some cakes and bought half a pint of vodka, which she put on the shelf. While she was at work I tried to lull the baby to sleep. But baby was restless, crying incessantly. I did not know how to calm her. Then my eyes fell on the bottle of vodka.

"It must be a very good thing," I thought, and decided to give a glass to baby. Before doing so I tasted it myself. It was bitter, but

somehow wanted more. I drank the first cup and, the bitterness having somewhat worn off, I drained another. In this manner I disposed of the entire bottle. Drowsy and weak, I took the baby into my arms and tried to rock it to sleep. But I myself began to stagger, and fell with the child to the floor.

Our mother found us there, screaming at the top of our voices. Presently the visitors arrived, and my mother reached for the bottle, only to discover that it had been emptied. It did not take her long to find the culprit. I shall always remember the whipping I got on that occasion.

Toward winter father arrived from Tomsk. He brought little money with him. The winter was severe, and epidemics were raging in the country. We fell sick one by one, father, mother, then all the girls. As there was no bread in the house, and no money to buy anything, the community took care of us till spring, housing and feeding us. By some miracle all of us escaped death, but our clothes had become rags. Our shoes fell to pieces. My parents decided to move to Tomsk, where we arrived barefoot and tattered, finding shelter at a poor inn on the outskirts of the town.

My father would work only a couple of days a week. He was lazy. The remainder of the week he idled away and drank. My sisters served as nursesmaids, while mother worked in a bakery, keeping the baby and me with her. We slept in the loft of a stable, with the horses stamping below us. Our bed was of straw, laid on the floor, which consisted of unshaven planks thrown across logs. Soon the baker's wife began to object to feeding an extra mouth, which belonged to me. I was then over eight years old.

"Why don't you send her to work? She can earn her own bread," she argued.

My mother would draw me to her breast, weep and beg for mercy. But the proprietress became impatient, threatening to throw us all out.

Finally father came to see us, with the good tidings that he had found a place for me. I was to care for a five-year-old boy, in return for my board and eighty-five kopecks a month.

"If you do well," my father added, "you will be and by receive a ruble."

Vivid Picture Painted of Peasant Poverty. Child of Destitute Couple, Her Life One of Grinding Toil—She Resolves at Last to Commit Suicide

Terrible Hardships of Trip to Siberia Are Graphically Described—At Fourteen, Continuing Years of Soul-Searing Toil, She Became Main Support of the Family

half years old, small and very thin. I had never before left my mother's side, and both of us wept bitterly at parting. It was a gray, painful, incomprehensible world into which I was being led by my father. My view of it was further blurred by a stream of tears.

I took care of the little boy for several days. One afternoon, while amusing him by making figures in the sand, I myself became so engrossed in the game that I quarreled with my charge, which led to a fight. I remember feeling keenly that I was in the right. But the child's mother did not inquire into the matter. She heard his screams and spanked me for it.

I was deeply hurt by the undeserved spanking administered by a strange woman.

"Where was my mother? Why did not she come to avenge me?"

My mother did not answer my cries. Nobody did. I felt miserable. How wrong was the world, how unjust! It was not worth while living in such a world.

My feet were bare. My dress was all in rags. Nobody seemed to care for me. I was all alone, without friends, and nobody knew of the yearning in my heart. I would drown myself, I thought. Yes, I would run to the river and drown myself. Then I would go up, free of all pain, into the arms of God.

I resolved to slip out at the first chance and jump into the river, but before the opportunity presented itself my father called. He found me all in tears.

"What's the matter, Manka?" he asked.

"I am going to drown myself, papa," I answered sadly.

"Great Heavens! What's happened, you foolish child?"

I then poured my heart out to him, begging to be taken to mother. He caressed me and talked of mother's distress if I left my place. He promised to buy me a pair of shoes, if I remained.

But I did not stay long. The little boy, having seen his mother punish me, began to take advantage of me, making life quite unbearable. Finally I ran away and wandered about town till dark, looking for my mother. It was late when a policeman picked me up crying in the street and carried me to the police station. The officer in charge of the station took me to his home for the night.

His house was rather large. I had never been in such a house before. When I awoke in the morning it seemed to me that there were a great many doors in it and all of them aroused my curiosity. As I opened one of the doors, I beheld the police officer asleep on a bed, with a pistol alongside of him. I wanted to beat a hasty retreat, but he awoke. He seized the pistol and, still dazed from sleep, threatened me with it. Frightened, I ran out of the room.

My father, meanwhile, had been informed of my flight and had gone to the police station in search of me. He was referred to the police officer's home. There he found me, weeping on the porch, and took me to my mother.

My parents then decided to establish a home. All their capital amounted to six rubles. They rented a basement for three rubles a month. Two rubles my father invested in some second-hand furniture, consisting of a lame table and benches, and a few utensils. With a few kopecks from the last ruble in her purse my mother prepared some food for us. She sent me to buy a kopeck's worth of salt.

The grocery store of the street was owned by a Jewess, named Nastasia Leontievna Fuchsan. She looked at me closely when I entered her store, recognizing that I was a stranger in the street, and asked me:

"Whose are you?"

"I am of the Frolkovs. We just moved into the basement in the next block."

"I need a little girl to help me out. Would you like to work for me?" she asked. "I'll give you a ruble a month and board."

I was overjoyed and started for home at such speed that by the time I got to my mother I was quite

breathless. I told her of the offer from the grocery woman.

"But," I added, "she is a Jewess."

I had heard so many things of Jews that I was rather afraid, on second thought, to live under the same roof with a Jewess. My mother calmed my fears on that score and went to the grocery to have a talk with the proprietress. She came back satisfied, and I entered upon my apprenticeship to Nastasia Leontievna.

It was not an easy life. I learned to wait on customers, to run errands, to do everything in the house from cooking and sewing to scrubbing floors. All day I slaved without rest, and at night I slept on a box in the passageway between the store and house. My monthly earnings went to my mother, but they never sufficed to drive the specter of starvation away from my home. My father earned little, but drank much, and developed his severe temper even more.

In time I got a raise to two rubles a month. But as I grew I required more clothes, which my mother had to supply me from my allowance. Nastasia Leontievna was exacting and not infrequently punished me. But she also loved me as though I had been her own daughter, and always tried to make up for harsh treatment. I owe a great deal to her, as she taught me to do almost everything, both in her business and in housework.

I must have been about eleven when, in a fit of temper, I quarreled with Nastasia Leontievna. Her brother frequented the theatre and constantly talked of it. I never quite understood what a theatre was like, but it allured me, and I resolved one evening to get acquainted with that place of wonders. I asked Nastasia Leontievna for money to go there. She refused.

"You little moujitchka (a peasant woman), what do you want with the theatre?" she asked derisively.

"You d—d Jewess!" I threw into her face fitfully, and ran out of the store. I went to my mother and told her of the incident. She was horrified.

"But now she won't take you back. What will we do without your wages, Marusia? How will we pay the rent? We will have to go begging again." And she cried.

After some time my employer came after me, rebuking me for my quick temper.

"How could I have known that you were so anxious to go to the theatre?" she asked. "All right, I'll give you fifteen kopecks every Sunday so that you can go."

I became a steady Sunday attendant of the gallery, watching with intense interest the players, their strange gestures and manners of speech.

Five years I worked for Nastasia Leontievna, assuming greater duties with the advance of my years. Early in the morning I would rise, open the shutters, knead the dough, and sweep or scrub the floors. I finally grew weary of this daily grind and began to think of finding other work. But my mother was sick and father worked less and less, drinking most of the time. He grew more brutal, beating us all, unmercifully. My sisters were forced to stay away from home. Shura married at sixteen, and I, fourteen years old, became the mainstay of the family. It was often necessary to get my pay in advance in order to keep the family from starving.

The temptation to steal came to me suddenly one day. I had never stolen anything before, and Nastasia Leontievna repeatedly pointed out this virtue in me to her friends.

"Here is a moujitchka who doesn't steal," she would say. But one time, on unpacking a barrel of sugar delivered at the store, I found, instead of the usual six sugar-loaves, seven. The impulse to take the extra loaf of sugar was irresistible. At night I smuggled it stealthily out of the store and took it home. My father was astonished.

"What have you done, Marusia? Take it back immediately," he ordered. I began to cry and said that the sugar was not really Nastasia Leontievna's, that the error had been made at the refinery. Then my father consented to keep it.

(CONTINUED TOMORROW)