

Tobbeltock, the Bessarabian Bandit Chief

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[Note: Comments in square brackets in the document are those of the translator.]

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Tobbeltock, the Bessarabian Bandit Chief by Wilhelm Mutschall

He really and truly lived, otherwise he would only be a figment of the creative imagination and Russian authorities would not have found it necessary to give the directive to the mayors' offices of the German communities to capture this heroic person and deliver him alive. In the files of the Tarutino Office of the year 1834, there is such a provision; without any doubt, in the other communities, too. If we want to get a picture of the life of our hero today, after almost 100 years, we can only share what the legend says about him.

Tobbeltock was an abandoned infant. Near the town of Tscharamursa, 15 *versts* [1 verst = 2/3 mi/1.06 km] from Tarutino, the Kutschurki family had a small estate which later passed over to a Bulgarian by the name of Trubtscha. Today, the estate is called "Trubtschasteppe" in the vernacular, although its owner has changed to a new one. Now, Kutschurki found a male child put out in a stone pit by the hand of an unknown mother. Because he looked somewhat fat and chubby, the family gave this child the name "Tobbeltock", what is supposed to mean something like "little fat sack". We do not know at what age and for whatever reason he left his providing father's house. In history, he just shows up as a perfect master of his craft—a bandit chief (*Räuberhauptmann*). Fear and terror went out ahead of him when he passed through the country with his accomplices and suddenly disappeared with plenty of plunder. In his defense, plenty others report the legend that he only visited the rich, but gifted the poor abundantly. Here is an example of how he once carried on. On the way to the market town of Tschimischlia, a little German farmer met up with Tobbeltock as he was driving his only cow to the market. Where are you from? Where are you headed for? "I owe nobleman R.R. 10 rubles and if I do not bring the money today, he wants to turn me over to the judge," the poor man confessed. Tobbeltock replied: "Here are 10 rubles for you with which you can pay your debt, and with the eleventh ruble, give it to the nobleman as a gift from me and tell him that he should add another 2,000 to it and I will collect the money the next time I show up!" The little farmer stammered his gratitude and did as he ordered. For the landowner, it was somewhat uncomfortable. He

requested for some Cossacks to be commandeered from around Gantscheschty and sent to him for his protection. Since week after week passed and the reported visit failed to materialize, he determined that the threat was a joke and sent away the guards. All at once, a small band of riders showed up on the estate yard at day-break. Their leader advanced to the bed with a pistol in hand and the miser quietly paid the requested 2,000 rubles. The riders soon disappeared into the fog.

Whoever did Tobbeltock good at one time, no hair was crumpled and he could move on his roads in safety. So it was with a Necker in Wittenberg, who stood in particular favor with him, because he had often received a night's quartering there. Necker once travelled with his neighbor to Kishinev and passed through a forest. Tobbeltock suddenly emerged from behind a tree and blocked the way for them. "Great pleasure on seeing you again!" "It is a good thing that I met you!" he called out, breaking off a branch from a tree and giving it to the travelers with the words: "Hold this branch high when you meet up with my people along the road up ahead and nothing is going to happen to you!" And that is just how it happened.

As strange and incredible as it sounds—the legend says that our hero took a young German woman as his wife. Her name was Justine Littau and she was the sister of Christoph Littau from Tarutino. She not only managed the kitchen for the small company, but also learned to handle a pistol. Tobbeltock was in a friendly relationship with the police, so that he could feel secure in their presence. But as his sins increased, strictest orders came down from above to send the offender to Petersburg alive, but only his head was sent because one feared of being betrayed by the living offender. Now, his Justine had to also be made harmless, as she had taken into her own fist the responsibility of continuing the business of her husband. As she was surrounded by the captors and an escape was not possible, she stretched out [killed] a few of them and surrendered. Now, how long she was kept under lock and key is not reported in any book of heroes. But she saw somebody as she followed, with her eyes, life on the street through the iron bars of the prison. Two men, her brother Christopher and a Krause, had taken upon themselves to bring a pastor, coming out of Switzerland, on the way to Georgia, to a certain city on the Black Sea. They moved along at a slow gait. By chance, Krause looked up and saw a familiar female face. "Hey, Christoph," he called out, "look, there is your sister Justine!" "I do not want to see her anymore," he replied and drove on.

These are the traditions as they came down to us from the above colonies of grandfather times. Also in the other colonies, Tobbeltock's name and his pranks are known. I would like to complete the life picture of this man by adding what Teacher F. Wagner of Sarata passed on in the "Textbook of Happy Youth, Part 3, Kronstadt".

A tar dealer was traveling on a lonely road to the district city of Akkerman. The lean horse pulled the heavy load with difficulty. Suddenly, a rider appeared in front of them with a big club in his hand. He told the driver to stop and unload the tar barrel. That was done. The rider now knocked in both ends of the barrel so that its whole contents poured out. Then the rider ordered the dealer to crawl through the empty barrel with his new white fur coat on. The dealer crawled through and came out the other end stained. Now the rider calculated how many silver rubles it cost for the loss of the tar and paid him the damage to the last penny (*Kopeck*). On leaving, he said: "I am Tobbeltock. I was sorry for your little horse, therefore, I made the load easier for it.

Also, it is not befitting for a tar dealer to be wearing such a nice fur coat. Now hurry to the city; in the inn you will find many farmers who have to get back home today. Join them and tell them that I am coming shortly." The dealer faithfully carried out the instruction. The farmers took off, but did not stay together as previously agreed, but the ones with the best horses chased on ahead and left the others behind. On the way, the first were confronted by men armed with pistols, took their horses and their money and left them standing on the steppe with their wagons. As they were leaving, they said: "Greetings to you from Tobbeltock and he says that it is not right for you leave the weaker brother in the lurch!"

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