The Daughter of the Commandant

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Chapter

1 Sergeant of the Guards

My father, Andréj Petróvitch Grineff, after serving in his youth under Count Münich,[1] had retired in 17—with the rank of senior major. Since that time he had always lived on his estate in the district of Simbirsk, where he married Avdotia, the eldest daughter of a poor gentleman in the neighbourhood. Of the nine children born of this union I alone survived; all my brothers and sisters died young. I had been enrolled as sergeant in the Séménofsky regiment by favour of the major of the Guard, Prince Banojik, our near relation. I was supposed to be away on leave till my education was finished. At that time we were brought up in another manner than is usual now. From five years old I was given over to the care of the huntsman, Savéliitch,[2] who from his steadiness and sobriety was considered worthy of becoming my attendant. Thanks to his care, at twelve years old I could read and write, and was considered a good judge of the points of a greyhound. At this time, to complete my education, my father hired a Frenchman, M. Beaupré, who was imported from Moscow at the same time as the annual provision of wine and Provence oil. His arrival displeased Savéliitch very much. "It seems to me, thank heaven," murmured he, "the child was washed, combed, and fed. What was the good of spending money and hiring a 'moussié,' as if there were not enough servants in the house?" Beaupré, in his native country, had been a hairdresser, then a soldier in Prussia, and then had come to Russia to be "outchitel," without very well knowing the meaning of this word.[3] He was a good creature, but wonderfully absent and hare-brained. His greatest weakness was a love of the fair sex. Neither, as he said himself, was he averse to the bottle, that is, as we say in Russia, that his passion was

drink. But, as in our house the wine only appeared at table, and then only in liqueur glasses, and as on these occasions it somehow never came to the turn of the "outchitel" to be served at all, my Beaupré soon accustomed himself to the Russian brandy, and ended by even preferring it to all the wines of his native country as much better for the stomach. We became great friends, and though, according to the contract, he had engaged himself to teach me French, German, and all the sciences, he liked better learning of me to chatter Russian indifferently. Each of us busied himself with our own affairs; our friendship was firm, and I did not wish for a better mentor. But Fate soon parted us, and it was through an event which I am going to relate. The washerwoman, Polashka, a fat girl, pitted with small-pox, and the one-eyed cow-girl, Akoulka, came one fine day to my mother with such stories against the "moussié," that she, who did not at all like these kind of jokes, in her turn complained to my father, who, a man of hasty temperament, instantly sent for that rascal of a Frenchman. He was answered humbly that the "moussié" was giving me a lesson. My father ran to my room. Beaupré was sleeping on his bed the sleep of the just. As for me, I was absorbed in a deeply interesting occupation. A map had been procured for me from Moscow, which hung against the wall without ever being used, and which had been tempting me for a long time from the size and strength of its paper. I had at last resolved to make a kite of it, and, taking advantage of Beaupré's slumbers, I had set to work. My father came in just at the very moment when I was tying a tail to the Cape of Good Hope. At the sight of my geographical studies he boxed my ears sharply, sprang forward to Beaupré's bed, and, awaking him without any consideration, he began to assail him with reproaches. In his trouble and confusion Beaupré vainly strove to rise; the poor "outchitel" was dead drunk. My father pulled him up by the collar of his

coat, kicked him out of the room, and dismissed him the same day, to the inexpressible joy of Savéliitch. Thus was my education finished. I lived like a stay-at-home son (nédoross'l),[4] amusing myself by scaring the pigeons on the roofs, and playing leapfrog with the lads of the courtyard,[5] till I was past the age of sixteen. But at this age my life underwent a great change. One autumn day, my mother was making honey jam in her parlour, while, licking my lips, I was watching the operations, and occasionally tasting the boiling liquid. My father, seated by the window, had just opened the Court Almanack, which he received every year. He was very fond of this book; he never read it except with great attention, and it had the power of upsetting his temper very much. My mother, who knew all his whims and habits by heart, generally tried to keep the unlucky book hidden, so that sometimes whole months passed without the Court Almanack falling beneath his eye. On the other hand, when he did chance to find it, he never left it for hours together. He was now reading it, frequently shrugging his shoulders, and muttering, half aloud— "General! He was sergeant in my company. Knight of the Orders of Russia! Was it so long ago that we—" At last my father threw the Almanack away from him on the sofa, and remained deep in a brown study, which never betokened anything good. "Avdotia Vassiliéva,"[6] said he, sharply addressing my mother, "how old is Petróusha?"[7] "His seventeenth year has just begun," replied my mother. "Petróusha was born the same year our Aunt Anastasia Garasimofna[8] lost an eye, and that—" "All right," resumed my father; "it is time he should serve. 'Tis time he should cease running in and out of the maids' rooms and climbing into the dovecote." The thought of a coming separation made such an impression on my mother that she dropped her spoon into her saucepan, and her eyes filled with tears. As for me, it is difficult to express the joy which took possession of me. The

idea of service was mingled in my mind with the liberty and pleasures offered by the town of Petersburg. I already saw myself officer of the Guard, which was, in my opinion, the height of human happiness. My father neither liked to change his plans, nor to defer the execution of them. The day of my departure was at once fixed. The evening before my father told me that he was going to give me a letter for my future superior officer, and bid me bring him pen and paper. "Don't forget, Andréj Petróvitch," said my mother, "to remember me to Prince Banojik; tell him I hope he will do all he can for my Petróusha." "What nonsense!" cried my father, frowning. "Why do you wish me to write to Prince Banojik?" "But you have just told us you are good enough to write to Petróusha's superior officer." "Well, what of that?" "But Prince Banojik is Petróusha's superior officer. You know very well he is on the roll of the Séménofsky regiment." "On the roll! What is it to me whether he be on the roll or no? Petróusha shall not go to Petersburg! What would he learn there? To spend money and commit follies. No, he shall serve with the army, he shall smell powder, he shall become a soldier and not an idler of the Guard, he shall wear out the straps of his knapsack. Where is his commission? Give it to me." My mother went to find my commission, which she kept in a box with my christening clothes, and gave it to my father with, a trembling hand. My father read it with attention, laid it before him on the table, and began his letter. Curiosity pricked me. "Where shall I be sent," thought I, "if not to Petersburg?" I never took my eyes off my father's pen as it travelled slowly over the paper. At last he finished his letter, put it with my commission into the same cover, took off his spectacles, called me, and said— "This letter is addressed to Andréj Karlovitch R., my old friend and comrade. You are to go to Orenburg[9] to serve under him." All my brilliant expectations and high hopes vanished. Instead of the gay and

lively life of Petersburg, I was doomed to a dull life in a far and wild country. Military service, which a moment before I thought would be delightful, now seemed horrible to me. But there was nothing for it but resignation. On the morning of the following day a travelling kibitka stood before the hall door. There were packed in it a trunk and a box containing a tea service, and some napkins tied up full of rolls and little cakes, the last I should get of home pampering. My parents gave me their blessing, and my father said to me— "Good-bye, Petr'; serve faithfully he to whom you have sworn fidelity; obey your superiors; do not seek for favours; do not struggle after active service, but do not refuse it either, and remember the proverb, 'Take care of your coat while it is new, and of your honour while it is young.'" My mother tearfully begged me not to neglect my health, and bade Savéliitch take great care of the darling. I was dressed in a short "touloup"[10] of hareskin, and over it a thick pelisse of foxskin. I seated myself in the kibitka with Savéliitch, and started for my destination, crying bitterly. I arrived at Simbirsk during the night, where I was to stay twenty-four hours, that Savéliitch might do sundry commissions entrusted to him. I remained at an inn, while Savéliitch went out to get what he wanted. Tired of looking out at the windows upon a dirty lane, I began wandering about the rooms of the inn. I went into the billiard room. I found there a tall gentleman, about forty years of age, with long, black moustachios, in a dressing-gown, a cue in his hand, and a pipe in his mouth. He was playing with the marker, who was to have a glass of brandy if he won, and, if he lost, was to crawl under the table on all fours. I stayed to watch them; the longer their games lasted, the more frequent became the all-fours performance, till at last the marker remained entirely under the table. The gentleman addressed to him some strong remarks, as a funeral sermon, and proposed that I should

play a game with him. I replied that I did not know how to play billiards. Probably it seemed to him very odd. He looked at me with a sort of pity. Nevertheless, he continued talking to me. I learnt that his name was Iván Ivánovitch[11] Zourine, that he commanded a troop in the ——th Hussars, that he was recruiting just now at Simbirsk, and that he had established himself at the same inn as myself. Zourine asked me to lunch with him, soldier fashion, and, as we say, on what Heaven provides. I accepted with pleasure; we sat down to table; Zourine drank a great deal, and pressed me to drink, telling me I must get accustomed to the service. He told good stories, which made me roar with laughter, and we got up from table the best of friends. Then he proposed to teach me billiards. "It is," said he, "a necessity for soldiers like us. Suppose, for instance, you come to a little town; what are you to do? One cannot always find a Jew to afford one sport. In short, you must go to the inn and play billiards, and to play you must know how to play." These reasons completely convinced me, and with great ardour I began taking my lesson. Zourine encouraged me loudly; he was surprised at my rapid progress, and after a few lessons he proposed that we should play for money, were it only for a "groch" (two kopeks),[12] not for the profit, but that we might not play for nothing, which, according to him, was a very bad habit. I agreed to this, and Zourine called for punch; then he advised me to taste it, always repeating that I must get accustomed to the service. "And what," said he, "would the service be without punch?" I followed his advice. We continued playing, and the more I sipped my glass, the bolder I became. My balls flew beyond the cushions. I got angry; I was impertinent to the marker who scored for us. I raised the stake; in short, I behaved like a little boy just set free from school. Thus the time passed very quickly. At last Zourine glanced at the clock, put down his cue, and told me I had lost a hundred roubles.[13] This

disconcerted me very much; my money was in the hands of Savéliitch. I was beginning to mumble excuses, when Zourine said— "But don't trouble yourself; I can wait, and now let us go to Arinúshka's." What could you expect? I finished my day as foolishly as I had begun it. We supped with this Arinúshka. Zourine always filled up my glass, repeating that I must get accustomed to the service. Upon leaving the table I could scarcely stand. At midnight Zourine took me back to the inn. Savéliitch came to meet us at the door. "What has befallen you?" he said to me in a melancholy voice, when he saw the undoubted signs of my zeal for the service. "Where did you thus swill yourself? Oh! good heavens! such a misfortune never happened before." "Hold your tongue, old owl," I replied, stammering; "I am sure you are drunk. Go to bed, ... but first help me to bed." The next day I awoke with a bad headache. I only remembered confusedly the occurrences of the past evening. My meditations were broken by Savéliitch, who came into my room with a cup of tea. "You begin early making free, Petr' Andréjïtch," he said to me, shaking his head. "Well, where do you get it from? It seems to me that neither your father nor your grandfather were drunkards. We needn't talk of your mother; she has never touched a drop of anything since she was born, except 'kvass.'[14] So whose fault is it? Whose but the confounded 'moussié;' he taught you fine things, that son of a dog, and well worth the trouble of taking a Pagan for your servant, as if our master had not had enough servants of his own!" I was ashamed. I turned round and said to him— "Go away, Savéliitch; I don't want any tea." But it was impossible to quiet Savéliitch when once he had begun to sermonize. "Do you see now, Petr' Andréjïtch," said he, "what it is to commit follies? You have a headache; you won't take anything. A man who gets drunk is good for nothing. Do take a little pickled cucumber with honey or half a glass of brandy to sober you. What do you think?"

At this moment a little boy came in, who brought me a note from Zourine. I unfolded it and read as follows:— "DEAR PETR' ANDRÉJÏTCH, "Oblige me by sending by bearer the hundred roubles you lost to me yesterday. I want money dreadfully. "Your devoted "IVÁN ZOURINE." There was nothing for it. I assumed a look of indifference, and, addressing myself to Savéliitch, I bid him hand over a hundred roubles to the little boy. "What—why?" he asked me in great surprise. "I owe them to him," I answered as coldly as possible. "You owe them to him!" retorted Savéliitch, whose surprise became greater. "When had you the time to run up such a debt? It is impossible. Do what you please, excellency, but I will not give this money." I then considered that, if in this decisive moment I did not oblige this obstinate old man to obey me, it would be difficult for me in future to free myself from his tutelage. Glancing at him haughtily, I said to him— "I am your master; you are my servant. The money is mine; I lost it because I chose to lose it. I advise you not to be headstrong, and to obey your orders." My words made such an impression on Savéliitch that he clasped his hands and remained dumb and motionless. "What are you standing there for like a stock?" I exclaimed, angrily. Savéliitch began to weep. "Oh! my father, Petr' Andréjïtch," sobbed he, in a trembling voice; "do not make me die of sorrow. Oh! my light, hearken to me who am old; write to this robber that you were only joking, that we never had so much money. A hundred roubles! Good heavens! Tell him your parents have strictly forbidden you to play for anything but nuts." "Will you hold your tongue?" said I, hastily, interrupting him. "Hand over the money, or I will kick you out of the place." Savéliitch looked at me with a deep expression of sorrow, and went to fetch my money. I was sorry for the poor old man, but I wished to assert myself, and prove that I was not a child. Zourine got his hundred roubles. Savéliitch was in haste to get me away from this