

Alexander Aleksandrov Sarys in Russias and Great Patriotic War  
"Cavalry Maiden"  
Cornet Durova  
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Zai Guisew  
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William Gammie  
Dwight Brown

"Cornet Aleksandrov," Nadezhda Andreevna Durova, in the uniform of the Mariupol' Hussars. From oil portrait, c. 1810.

## Nadezhda Durova



# THE CAVALRY MAIDEN

Journals of a Russian Officer  
in the Napoleonic Wars

Translation, Introduction, and Notes by

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## The Cavalry Maiden

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## *“My Childhood Years”*

My mother, born Aleksandrovicheva, was one of the prettiest girls in Little Russia. At the end of her fifteenth year, throngs of suitors came to seek her hand. My mother's heart preferred hussar Captain Durov to all the many others, but unfortunately this was not the choice of her father, a proud, arbitrary Ukrainian *pan*.<sup>1</sup> He told my mother to put out of her head the fantastic idea of marrying a Muscovite, and a soldier at that. My grandfather ruled his family with an iron hand: any order of his was to be blindly obeyed, and there was no possibility of either placating him or changing any of his announced intentions. The consequence of this unreasonable severity was that one stormy autumn night my mother, who slept in the same room as her elder sister, stealthily rose from her bed, picked up her cloak and hood and, in stocking feet, crept with bated breath past her sister's bed, quietly opened the door into the drawing-room, quietly closed it, dashed nimbly across the room and, opening the door into the garden, flew like an arrow down the long lane of chestnuts that led to a wicket-gate. My mother hastily unlocked this little door and threw herself into the captain's arms. He was waiting for her with a carriage hitched to four strong horses who, like the wind then raging, rushed them down the Kiev road.

They were married in the first village and drove directly to Kiev, where Durov's regiment was quartered. Although my mother's act was excusable in light of her youth, love, and the virtues of my father, who was a very handsome man of gentle disposition and captivating manners, it was so contrary to the patriarchal customs of the Ukrainian land that in his first outbreak of rage my grandfather pronounced a curse on his daughter.

For two years my mother never stopped writing to her father to beg his forgiveness, but to no avail: he would hear none of it, and his rage grew in proportion to their attempts to mollify it. My parents finally gave up all hope of appeasing a man who considered obstinacy a mark of character. They ceased writing letters to her implacable father and would have resigned themselves to their lot, but my mother's pregnancy revived her

My translation of Durova's memoir of childhood appeared in *The Female Autograph* (*New York Literary Forum* 12–13), 1984; paperback: University of Chicago, 1987. It has been revised somewhat for this edition.

1. Ivan Il'ich Aleksandrovich (died c. 1789) was a provincial civil servant who had an estate near Pirjatin in the Poltava region. Durova's mother, Nadezhda, was born about 1765 and died, according to her daughter's account, in 1807. The hussar was Andrej Vasil'evich Durov, born in Ufa province to the descendants of a Polish family (originally Turowski) who were resettled there from their native Smolensk-Polotsk region after Russia hegemony began in the 1650s (Juditin, 413–14).

flagging courage. She began to hope that the birth of her child would restore her to paternal favor.

My mother passionately desired a son, and she spent her entire pregnancy indulging in the most seductive daydreams. "I will give birth to a son as handsome as a cupid," she would say. "I'll name him Modest. I will nurse him myself, bring him up, teach him, and my son, my darling Modest, will be the joy of my life. . ." So my mother dreamed but, as her time drew near, the pangs preceding my birth came as a most disagreeable surprise to her. They had had no place in her dreams and produced on her a first unfavorable impression of me. It became necessary to send for an *accoucheur*, who insisted on letting blood. The idea was extremely frightening to my mother, but there was nothing she could do about it; she had to yield to necessity. Soon after the bloodletting I came into the world, the poor creature whose arrival destroyed my mother's dreams and dashed all her hopes.

"Give me my child!" said my mother, as soon as she had recovered somewhat from her pain and fear. The child was brought and placed on her lap. But alas! this was no son as handsome as a cupid. This was a daughter—and a bogatyr of a daughter at that!<sup>2</sup> I was unusually large, had thick black hair, and was bawling loudly. Mother pushed me off her lap and turned to the wall.

In a few days Mama recovered and, yielding to the advice of her friends, ladies of the regiment, decided to nurse me herself. They told her that a mother who nurses her child at the breast finds that the act alone is enough to make her begin loving it. I was brought; my mother took me from the maid's arms, put me to her breast, and gave me to suck. But I evidently sensed the lack of maternal love in that nourishment and therefore refused her every effort to make me nurse. Mama decided to exercise patience to overcome my obstinacy and went on holding me at the breast, but, bored by my continued refusal, she stopped watching me and began talking to a lady who was visiting her. At this point, evidently guided by the fate that intended me for a soldier's uniform, I suddenly gripped my mother's breast and squeezed it as hard as I could with my gums. My mother gave a piercing shriek, jerked me from her breast, threw me into the arms of her maid, and fell face down in the pillows. "Take her away; get that worthless child out of my sight, and never show her again," said Mama, waving her hand and burying her head in a pillow.

I was four months old when the regiment in which my father was serving received orders to go to Kherson. Since this was a domestic march, Papa took his family with him. I was entrusted to the supervision

<sup>2</sup>. Bogatyrs were the warrior heroes of the Russian epic songs called *byliny*.

and care of my mother's chambermaid, a girl of her own age. During the day the maid sat with Mama in the carriage, holding me on her lap. She fed me cow's milk from a bottle and swaddled me so tightly that my face turned blue and my eyes were bloodshot. At our night's halts I rested, because I was handed over to a peasant woman brought in from the village who unswaddled me, put me to her breast, and slept with me all night. Thus after each day's march I had a new wetnurse.

Neither the changing wetnurses nor the agonizing swaddling impaired my health. I was very robust and vigorous, but incredibly vociferous as well. One day my mother was totally out of sorts; I had kept her awake all night. The march started at daybreak and Mama settled down to sleep in the carriage, but I began crying again and, despite all my nurses's attempts to comfort me, bawled louder by the hour. Vexed beyond measure, Mama flew into a rage and, snatching me from the arms of the maid, threw me out the window! The hussars cried out in horror, jumped off their horses, and picked me up covered with blood and showing no sign of life. They would have returned me to the carriage, but Papa galloped up to them, took me from their arms and, in floods of tears, placed me on his saddle. Trembling and weeping, as pale as a corpse, he rode on without saying a word or turning his head in the direction where my mother rode. To the astonishment of everyone, I came back to life and, against all expectations, was not permanently maimed. The shock of the fall just left me bleeding from the nose and mouth. Papa raised his eyes to heaven with a joyful feeling of gratitude, and, clutching me to his breast, he went over to the carriage and said to my mother, "Give thanks to God that you are not a murderer! Our daughter is alive, but I will never return her to your power; I'll care for her myself." And with this he rode off and carried me with him until that night's halt without a word or glance toward my mother.

From that memorable day of my life my father entrusted me to God's providence and the care of flank hussar Astakhov, who was always at Papa's side in quarters as well as on the march.<sup>3</sup> I was in my mother's room only at night; as soon as Papa got up and went out, I was taken away, too. My tutor Astakhov carried me around all day, taking me into the squadron stables and sitting me on the horses, giving me a pistol to play with, and brandishing his saber while I clapped my hands and laughed out loud at the sight of the scattering sparks and glittering steel. In the evening he took me to hear the musicians who played various pieces at dusk, and I listened until I fell asleep. Only slumbering could I be brought back inside. If I were not sleeping, I became numb with fear

<sup>3</sup>. Durova's biographer, Colonel Saks, says that the practice of using personal orderlies as nannies to officers' children was still common in the first decade of the twentieth century (5).

and clung howling to Astakhov's neck at the mere sight of my mother's room. From the time of my aerial journey out the carriage window, Mama no longer interfered in any way in my life. She had another daughter to console her, this one really as handsome as a cupid and, as the saying goes, the apple of her eye.

Soon after my birth my grandfather forgave my mother and did so in the most solemn way: he went to Kiev, asked the archbishop to absolve him of his impetuous oath never to pardon his daughter, and, once he had obtained pastoral absolution, finally wrote to my mother that he forgave her and blessed her marriage and the child born of it. He asked her to come and see him both to accept the paternal blessing in person and to receive her dowry. My mother had no way of taking advantage of this invitation until Papa was forced to retire. I was four and a half when my father realized that he would have to leave the army. There were two cradles in his quarters in addition to my cot; such a family made life on the march impossible. He went to Moscow to seek a position in the civil service, and my mother took me and the other two children to live with her father until her husband's return.<sup>4</sup>

Once she took me from Astakhov's arms, my mother never knew a single calm or cheerful moment. Each day my strange sallies and knightly spirit angered her. I had memorized all the words of command and was wild about horses, and when my mother tried to make me knit shoelaces I wept and begged her to give me a pistol, as I said, to click. In short, I was making the best possible use of the upbringing Astakhov had given me. Every day my martial propensities grew stronger, and every day my mother liked me less. I never forgot anything that I had learned in the constant company of the hussars; I ran and galloped around the room in all directions, shouting at the top of my voice: "Squadron! To the right, face! From your places, charge—CHARGE!" My aunts laughed out loud and Mama, driven to desperation by it all, could not contain her vexation. She took me to her room, stood me in the corner, and drove me to bitter tears with abuse and threats.

My father obtained a post as mayor of a district capital and moved his entire family there.<sup>5</sup> My mother, who had come to dislike me wholeheartedly, seemed bent on doing everything she could to intensify and confirm my already invincible passion for freedom and the military life.

<sup>4</sup>. Children continued to be born to the Durovs regularly every two years or so until the turn of the century. Only four of them survived to adulthood: Nadezhda; Kleopatra, born in 1791; Vasilij, the first and only son, 1799; and Evgenija, 1801 (Blinov, 415).

<sup>5</sup>. The city where Durova grew up was Sarapul, on the Kama river in the western foothills of the Urals.

She never allowed me to enjoy the fresh air of the garden, or even leave her side for half an hour. I had to sit in her room all day and weave lace. She herself taught me to sew and knit, and when she saw that I had neither inclination nor skill for those pursuits and that everything ripped and broke in my hands, she lost her temper, flew into a rage, and whipped those hands painfully.

I turned ten. My mother was careless enough to tell my father in my presence that she no longer had the strength to cope with Astakhov's ward, the hussar upbringing was deep-rooted, the fire in my eyes frightened her, and she would rather see me dead than with such propensities. Papa replied that I was still a child, and she should pay no attention to me. As the years went on, I would take on other propensities, and all this would pass. "Don't take these childish ways so much to heart, my friend," said Papa. But fate decreed that my mother would not believe or follow her husband's good advice. She continued to keep me in seclusion, denying me every youthful joy. I submitted in silence, but oppression matured my mind. I resolved firmly to shake off my heavy yoke and began in an adult way to work out plans for doing so. I decided to take every means to learn to ride horseback and shoot firearms and then, in disguise, to leave my father's house. In order to begin realizing the radical change in my life that I contemplated, I never missed a chance to slip away from my mother's supervision. These chances came whenever visitors arrived to see Mama. They kept her occupied and I, beside myself with joy, ran out into the garden to my arsenal—that is, the dark corner behind the shrubbery where I stored my bow and arrows, a saber, and a broken gun. Busy with my weapons, I was oblivious to everything else on earth, and only the shrill cries of the maids searching for me brought me running in alarm to meet them. They led me to the room where punishment was always waiting.

Thus passed the two years until I turned twelve. Just then Papa bought himself a saddlehorse, an almost untameable Circassian stallion. My father, who was an excellent rider, broke this handsome beast himself and named him Alcides. Now all my plans, intentions, and desires were concentrated on this steed. I decided to do all I could to accustom him to me—and I succeeded. I gave him bread, sugar, and salt; I took oats from the coachman on the sly and spread them in his manger; I stroked and caressed him, speaking to him as if he could understand me, until at last I had the haughty steed following me as meekly as a lamb.

Almost every day I got up at dawn, stealthily left my room, and ran to the stable. Alcides greeted me with a whinny. I gave him bread and sugar and led him out into the yard. Then I brought him over to the porch and mounted his back from the steps. His quick starts, frisks, and snorts did not alarm me in the least; I held onto his mane and let him run with me

all around the yard. I had no fear that he would carry me outside the gates, because they were still locked. On one occasion this pastime was interrupted by the arrival of the groom who, with a shriek of fear and astonishment, rushed to stop Alcides as he galloped past with me. But the steed arched his head, reared, and broke into a run around the yard, frisking and kicking. It was fortunate for me that Efim was so numb with fear that he lost the use of his voice; otherwise his shout would have alarmed the household and drawn me harsh punishment. I quieted Alcides easily, caressing him with my voice and patting and stroking him. He slowed to a walk and, when I embraced his neck and pressed my face against it, he stopped at once because this was the way I always dismounted or, more accurately, slid down off him. Now Efim approached to take him, muttering through his teeth that he would tell my mother, but I promised to give him all my pocket money if he would say nothing and permit me to lead Alcides back to the stable. At this promise Efim's face cleared; he smiled wryly, stroked his beard, and said, "Well, so be it, if that rogue obeys you better than he does me!" Triumphantly I led Alcides into the stable and, to Efim's astonishment, the savage steed followed me meekly, arching his neck and bending his head to nibble lightly at my hair or shoulder.

With each passing day I grew more bold and enterprising, afraid of nothing on earth except my mother's wrath. It seemed quite odd to me that other girls of my age were frightened of being left alone in the dark; on the contrary, I was prepared in the dead of night to go into a graveyard, a forest, a deserted house, a cave, or a dungeon. In short, there was nowhere I would not have gone as boldly at night as in the daytime. Although I, like other children, had been told tales of ghosts, corpses, wood goblins, robbers, and water nymphs who tickled people to death, and although I believed this nonsense with all my heart, none of it frightened me. On the contrary, I thirsted for dangers and longed to be surrounded by them. If I had had the least freedom, I would have gone looking for them, but my mother's vigilant eye followed my every step and impulse.

One day Mama and some ladies went for an outing into the dense pine forest on the far side of the Kama. She took me with her, as she put it, to keep me from breaking my neck alone at home. This was the very first time in my life that I had been taken out into the open where I could see dense forest and vast fields and the wide river! I could barely catch my breath for joy, and we no sooner came into the forest than I, out of my mind with rapture, immediately ran off and kept running until the voices of the company were no longer audible. Then my joy was complete and perfect: I ran, frisked, picked flowers, and climbed to the tips of tall trees to see farther. I climbed slender birches and, holding tight to the crown,

leaped off; the sapling set me down lightly on the ground.<sup>6</sup> Two hours flew like two minutes! In the meantime they were searching for me and calling me in chorus. I heard them, but how could I part with such captivating freedom? At last, completely exhausted, I returned to the company. I had no trouble locating them, because the voices had never stopped calling me. I found my mother and the other ladies in a terrible state of anxiety. They cried out in joy when they caught sight of me, but Mama, who guessed from my contented face that I had not strayed, but gone off of my own volition, flew into a violent rage. She poked my back and called me a damned pest of a girl, sworn to anger her always and everywhere!

We returned home. Mama pulled me by the ear all the way from the parlor to her bedroom. She took me over to the lace pillow and ordered me to get to work without straightening up or looking around. "Just you wait, you wretch, I'll tie you on a rope and give you nothing but bread to eat!" With these words she went to tell Papa about what she called my monstrous act, and I was left to sort bobbins, set pins, and think about the glories of nature which I had just seen for the first time in all their majesty and beauty. From that day, although my mother's supervision and strictness became even more unremitting, they could no longer either frighten or restrain me.

From morning to night I sat over work which, I must confess, was the vilest imaginable because, unlike other girls, I could not, would not, and did not want to acquire the skill, but ripped, ruined, and tangled it until before me lay a canvas ball with a repulsive, snarled strip stretching across it—my bobbin-lace. I sat patiently over it all day, patiently because my plan was prepared and my intentions resolute. At nightfall, when the house quieted down, the doors were locked, and the light in Mama's room went out, I got up, dressed stealthily, sneaked out across the back porch, and ran straight to the stable. There I took Alcides, led him through the garden to the cattleyard, mounted him, and rode out down a narrow lane straight to the riverbank and Startsev mountain. Then I dismounted again and led Alcides uphill, holding him by the halter because I didn't know how to bridle him and had no way of getting him to climb the mountain of his own volition. I led him by the halter across the precipitous slope until I reached a level spot, where I looked for a stump

. . . And climb black branches up a snow-white trunk  
Toward heaven, till the tree could bear no more,  
But dipped its top and set me down again.

—Robert Frost, "Birches"

or hillock from which to remount. Then I slapped Alcides' neck and clicked my tongue until the good steed broke into a gallop, a run, and even a breakneck dash.

At the first hint of dawn I returned home, put the horse in the stable, and went to sleep without undressing. This was what led at last to the discovery of my nocturnal excursions. The maid who took care of me kept finding me fully clothed in bed every morning and told my mother, who undertook to find out how and why this came about. She herself saw me going out at midnight fully clothed and, to her inexpressible horror, leading the wicked stallion out of the stable! She thought I must be sleepwalking and did not dare stop me or call out for fear of alarming me. She ordered the manservant and Efim to keep an eye on me, and she herself went to Papa's room, roused him, and told him what had happened. My father, astonished, got up hastily to go and see this singular occurrence for himself. But it all ended sooner than they expected: Alcides and I were led back in triumph, each to his proper place. The servant whom Mother had ordered to follow me saw me trying to mount the horse and, unlike Mama, decided that I was no sleepwalker. He came out of ambush and asked me, "And where are you going, miss?"

After this affair my mother wanted without fail to rid herself of my presence at any cost and decided to take me to my old grandmother Aleksandrovicheva in Little Russia. I had entered my fourteenth year by then. I was tall, slim, and shapely, but my martial spirit was sketched on my features and, although I had white skin, bright rosy cheeks, sparkling eyes, and black brows, every day my mirror and Mama told me that I was very ugly. My face was pitted from smallpox, my features irregular, and Mother's continual repression of my freedom, her strict and at times even cruel treatment of me, had marked my countenance with an expression of fear and sadness. Perhaps I would at last have forgotten all my hussar mannerisms and become an ordinary girl like the rest if my mother had not kept depicting woman's lot in such a dismal way. In my presence she would describe the fate of that sex in the most prejudicial terms: woman, in her opinion, must be born, live, and die in slavery; eternal bondage, painful dependence, and repression of every sort were her destiny from the cradle to the grave; she was full of weaknesses, devoid of accomplishments, and capable of nothing. In short, woman was the most unhappy, worthless, and contemptible creature on earth! This description made my head reel. I resolved, even at the cost of my life, to part company from the sex I thought to be under God's curse. Papa, too, often said, "If I had a son instead of Nadezhda, I shouldn't have to worry about my old age; he would be my staff in the evening of my days." I would be ready to weep at these words from the father I loved so extravagantly. These two

contradictory emotions—love for my father and aversion to my own sex—troubled my young soul with equal force. With a resolve and constancy rare in one so young I set about working out a plan to escape the sphere prescribed by nature and custom to the female sex.

Such was my frame of mind and spirit at the beginning of my fourteenth year when my mother delivered me to my grandmother in Little Russia and left me there.<sup>7</sup> My grandfather was no longer alive. The family consisted of my eighty-year-old grandmother, an intelligent and pious woman who had once been a beauty and was known for her unusually gentle disposition; her son, my uncle, a man in his middle years, comely, kind, sensitive, and insufferably capricious, who was married to a young woman of rare beauty from the Lizogub family of Chernigov; and, finally, my aunt, a spinster about forty-five years old.<sup>8</sup> I liked my uncle's young and lovely wife best, but I never remained willingly in the company of my relations; they were so grand, so devout, such implacable foes of martial propensities in a girl that in their presence I was afraid even to think about my cherished intentions. Although my freedom was in no way restricted and I could roam wherever I wanted from morning to night without fear of rebuke, I think they would have condemned me to ecclesiastic penance if I had even dared to hint at riding horseback, so unreserved was my relations' horror at the mere idea of such illicit and unnatural, to their mind, pursuits for women, and particularly girls.

Under the clear sky of Little Russia my health became perceptibly better, although at the same time I burned in the sun and turned black and even uglier than before. Here nobody corseted me or wearied me with bobbin-lace. With my passionate love for nature and freedom, I spent all my days either running around the forested parcels of my uncle's estate or floating on the Udaj in a large boat of the type that Ukrainians call a *dub*. Had they known about this latter pastime, they might not have permitted it, but I was careful to undertake my navigation after dinner when my young aunt's sharp eyes were closed in sleep. My uncle busied himself with household matters or read the newspaper while my spinster aunt listened with great interest. There remained only my grandmother to catch a glimpse of me, but her eyesight was already weak, and I rowed about under her windows in complete security.

7. The direct distance between Pirjatin and Sarapul is over fifteen hundred kilometers as the crow flies. The journey would have taken well over a month at best.

8. Durova's maternal grandmother was Evfrosin'ja Grigor'evna Aleksandrovicheva, born Ogrenovicheva. The son who inherited the Pirjatin estate was Porfrii; his young wife was Marfa Jakov'evna, born Lizogub; and his spinster sister was named Ul'jana.



Nadezhda Durova, age 14.

In the spring, another of my aunts, Znachko-Javorskaja, who lived near the city of Lubny, came to see us. She took a liking to me and won my grandmother's permission to take me to stay with her for the summer.<sup>9</sup>

Here both my occupations and my pleasures were completely different. My aunt was a strict woman who observed inflexible order and propriety in everything. She lived expansively; she was on good terms with the best society among the landowners of the district; she had a good cook and often gave balls. I found myself in a new sphere. I never heard the female sex abused or reproached and began making my peace with women's lot, especially as I saw the polite and obliging attentions of men. My aunt dressed me very well and tried to rid my face of sunburn. My military dreams slowly began fading bit by bit from my mind. The position of women no longer seemed so dreadful to me, and at last I grew to like my new way of life. Acquiring a friend completed the pacification of my turbulent designs. Another niece, Ostrogradskaja, who was a year younger than I, was also living with my aunt. We two were inseparable. We spent the morning in our aunt's room, reading, drawing, or playing; after dinner we were free to roam until teatime and went off at once to the *levada* (which is what they called the piece of land that usually adjoins the garden, separated from it only by a ditch). I leaped the ditch with the ease of a wild goat, my cousin followed my example, and we spent our afternoon excursion flying throughout the open space of all the neighboring *levadas*.

My aunt, like all Ukrainian women, was very devout and observed and followed strictly all the rites prescribed by religion. Every holy day she attended high mass, vespers, and matins, and my cousin and I had to do the same. At first I was very reluctant to get up before dawn to go to church, but in our neighborhood there lived a lady landowner named Kiriakova with her son, and they always came to church, too. While we waited for the service to begin, Kiriakova conversed with our aunt, and her son, a young man of twenty-five, would join us, or rather me, because he spoke only to me. He was very good looking, with beautiful black eyes, hair, and brows, and a youthful fresh complexion. I became quite fond of the divine service and always rose for matins even earlier than my aunt. At last my talks with young Kiriak attracted my aunt's attention. She began observing us and questioned my cousin, who at once told her

9. In addition to the senior Nadezhda Durova and the unmarried Ul'jana, three other Aleksandrovich sisters can be traced in the pages of Vadim Modzalevskij's *Malorossijskij rodoslovnik* [Ukrainian Genealogy], 4 vols. (Kiev, 1908–1914): Praskov'ja Znachko-Javorskaja, Anna Ostrogradskaja, and Evrosin'ja (or Fedosia) Butovskaja, whose son edited Durova's *The Cavalry Maiden* in 1836.

that Kiriak had taken my hand and asked me to give him my ring, saying that then he could consider himself sanctioned to speak to my aunt.

Having received this explanation from my cousin, my aunt sent for me: "What does our neighbor's son talk to you about when we are together?" I had no gift for dissembling and at once told her everything that had been said to me. My aunt shook her head; she was not at all pleased. "No," she said, "that's not the way to ask for a girl's hand. Why declare himself to you? He should have come straight to your relations."

After that I was sent back to Grandmother. I pined for young Kiriak long afterwards. That was my first attachment, and I think that if they had married me to him then, I would have relinquished my martial designs forever. But the fate that destined me for a battlefield career decreed otherwise. Old Kiriakova asked my aunt to inquire about my dowry and, when she found out that it consisted of a few yards of ribbon, linen, and muslin, forbade her son to think of me.

I had entered my fifteenth year when one day my uncle received a letter that plunged us all into sadness and perplexity. It was from Papa. He was writing to my mother, begging her to forgive him and come home, and swearing to give it all up. None of us could understand anything from this letter. Where was my mother? Why was the letter addressed to her in Little Russia? Had she parted from my father, and if so, why? My uncle and grandmother were lost in conjecture.

Two weeks or so after the letter came, I was out boating on the Udai when suddenly I heard the shrill voice of Grandmother's chambermaid: "Pannochko, pannochko! idyt' do babusii!"<sup>10</sup> This summons to Grandmother frightened me. I turned the boat around and mentally bade farewell to my obliging *dub*, supposing that now they would order it chained to the pilings and that my excursions on the river were finished forever. "How did Grandmother happen to see me?" I asked, pulling up to the shore.

"Grandmother didn't see you," replied Agafja, "but Stepan has come for you. Your mother sent him."

Mama! For me? How can that be? Oh, beautiful land, must I really leave you? . . . I hurried to the house. There I saw the old servant who had been with my father on all his campaigns. Gray-haired Stepan respectfully handed me a letter. My father wrote that he and my mother wished me to come home right away, that they were tired of living apart from me. I found this incomprehensible. I knew that my mother disliked me, and thus it was Papa who wanted me with him. But why on earth had my mother agreed? No matter what I thought and how much I deplored the necessity of leaving Little Russia, the constraints on my

<sup>10</sup> "Missy, missy, you're to go to your grandmother!" (Ukrainian)

freedom that awaited me, and the disagreeable exchange of a fine climate for a cold and harsh one, I had no choice but to obey. For two days they cooked, baked, and roasted; they gave me a huge basket of delicacies and packed everything. On the third day my venerable grandmother hugged me to her breast and, kissing me, said: "Go, my child! The Lord's blessing on your journey, and his blessings on your journey through life as well!" She placed her hand on my head and quietly invoked God's protection on me. The prayer of this righteous woman was heard: throughout my turbulent martial life I have often had occasion to experience the clear intercession of the Almighty. . . .

There is nothing worth describing about my journey under the supervision of old Stepan with his twelve-year-old daughter Annushka as my companion. It began and ended the way all such voyages do: we traveled with our own horses slowly and for a long time and at last arrived. As I opened the door to the parlor of my father's house, I heard my little sister Kleopatra saying, "Mama, come here! A young lady has arrived." Against my expectations, Mother received me kindly. She was pleased to see that I had taken on the modest and steadfast appearance so becoming to a young lady. Although in a year and a half I had grown a good deal and was nearly a head taller than my mother, I no longer had the martial appearance that made me look like Achilles in woman's dress nor the hussar ways that drove her to despair.

After a few days at home I found out why they had been forced to send for me. My father, never indifferent to beauty, had betrayed my mother in her absence. He took a pretty little girl, the daughter of a townsman, as his mistress. For a long time after her return Mama knew nothing about it, but one of her woman friends decided to do her the favor of disclosing the ruinous secret and poisoned her life with the cruellest venom of all—jealousy! My unhappy mother listened numbly to the story her recklessly obliging friend had to tell, heard her out, went away without saying a word, and took to her bed. When Papa came home, she did her best to speak gently and calmly to him, but how could that be within her power? From her first words the agony in her heart overwhelmed her. Sobs cut through her voice. She beat her breast, wrung her hands, and cursed the day of her birth and the moment when she first knew love. She begged my father to kill her and thus spare her the unbearable torment of living with his disdain. Papa was horrified to see my mother in such a state. He tried to calm her and begged her not to believe absurd tales, but when he saw that she was too well informed about it all, he swore by God and his conscience to quit his illicit connection. Mama believed him, calmed down, and forgave him.

Papa kept his word for a time. He left his mistress and even arranged a

marriage for her, but then he took her back again, and this time my mother, in despair, decided to part forever from her unfaithful husband; she set out for her mother's house in Little Russia, but stopped in Kazan. Unaware of this, Papa wrote to Little Russia to persuade her to forgive him and return home. Just then he himself got a letter from my mother. She wrote that she was not strong enough to remain away from him; she could not bear the thought of parting forever from a husband whom she still loved beyond measure even though he had wronged her so cruelly. She implored him to think twice and return to his obligations. Papa was moved; he repented and asked my mother to return. It was then that she sent for me, supposing that the presence of his beloved daughter would make him forget entirely the unworthy object of his attachment.

Unhappy woman! She was fated to be deceived in all her expectations and to drink the cup of grief to the dregs. Papa went from one attachment to the next and never came back to my mother. She languished, wasted away, fell ill, went to Perm to be treated by the famous Gral, and died at thirty-five, more a victim of misfortune than disease.<sup>11</sup> Alas! in vain I wash these lines with my tears. Woe to me, the first cause of all my mother's troubles! My birth, sex, traits, propensities—none of them were what my mother would have wished. My existence poisoned her life; constant vexation ruined her already naturally hot-tempered disposition and made her cruel. Even her exceptional beauty could not save her then. My father ceased loving her, and an untimely grave put an end to her love, hatred, suffering, and misfortunes.

My mother, who no longer took any pleasure in society, led a reclusive life. I took advantage of this circumstance to win permission from my father to ride horseback. Papa ordered a Cossack *chekmen* tailored for me and gave me his *Alcides*.<sup>12</sup> From that time on I was always my father's companion on his excursions outside the city. He took pleasure in teaching me to ride handsomely, keeping a firm seat in the saddle and managing the horse skillfully. I was a quick student. Papa admired my ease, skill, and fearlessness. He said that I was the living image of him as a youth and that, had I been born a boy, I would have been the staff of his old age and an honor to his name. This set my head awhirl, and this time for good! I was no child; I had turned sixteen. The seductive pleasures of society, life in Little Russia, and Kiriak's black eyes faded from my memory like a dream; brightly colored scenes of my childhood in camp among the hussars were sketched in my imagination instead. It all

<sup>11.</sup> Fedor Gral's life and benefactions are described in: Modest Kittari, "Vospominanija o doktore Grale," *Pernskij sbornik* (Moscow, 1859), bk. 1, 42-49. Durova's mother was about forty-two when she died.

<sup>12.</sup> *Chekmen*, a long tunic with a fitted waist.

revived in my soul. I could not understand why I had not thought of my plan for nearly two years. My grief-stricken mother now described woman's lot in even more horrific colors. Martial ardor flared in my soul with incredible force; my mind swarmed with dreams, and I began searching actively for means to realize my previous intention: to become a warrior and a son to my father and to part company forever from the sex whose sad lot and eternal dependence had begun to terrify me.<sup>13</sup>

Before Mama went to Perm to seek treatment, a Cossack regiment arrived in our city to suppress the Tatars' incessant thievery and murder.<sup>14</sup> Papa often invited the colonel and his officers to dinner and went for rides with them outside the town, but I took the precaution never to take part in these excursions. I had to be sure that they never saw me in the *chekmen* and had no idea how I looked in men's clothing. I had a flash of inspiration when the Cossacks arrived in the city. Now I saw a sure way to carry out the plan I had undertaken so long ago. I saw the possibility of waiting for the Cossacks' departure and joining them for the journey to areas where regular army regiments were stationed.<sup>15</sup>

At last the decisive time came to act according to the plan as I had worked it out. The Cossacks received the order to move out, and they left on September 15, 1806. Their first full day's halt would be some fifty versts from the city. The seventeenth was my name-day, and the day on which, through fate, coincidence of circumstance, or invincible propensity, it was fixed for me to quit my father's house and take up an entirely new way of life.<sup>16</sup> On September 17, I awoke before dawn and sat by my window to await its appearance; it might well be the last I ever saw in my own land. What awaited me in the turbulent world? Would not my mother's curse and my father's grief pursue me? Would they survive? Could they await the realization of my colossal scheme? How horrible it would be if their death took from me the goal of my actions! These thoughts now clustered and now passed one after another through my head. My heart constricted and tears glistened on my lashes. Just then

<sup>13.</sup> During the seven years missing from this account of her years at home, Durova married Vasilij Chernov, a civil servant, on October 25, 1801. The birth of their son Ivan on January 7, 1803, was registered in Sarapul. After her husband was transferred to Irbit, Durova left him and returned to her father's house.

<sup>14.</sup> The Cossacks were people, mainly of Ukrainian and Russian stock, who had gradually been granted land on the frontiers and an autonomy unknown in Russia proper in exchange for service as auxiliary mounted police and cavalry.

<sup>15.</sup> By mid-1806 there was a strong probability that the Cossacks would be sent to Russia's western borders to reinforce the armies preparing to check the French in Prussia.

<sup>16.</sup> The routine on long marches was two or three days on the road, bivouacking at night, for each full day of rest in a populated settlement. Thus Durova's plan was to reach the site of the Cossacks' September 17th halt before they moved on early the following morning.

dawn broke. Its scarlet glow quickly flooded the sky, and its beautiful light, flowing into my room, lit up the objects there: my father's saber, hanging on the wall directly opposite the window, seemed to catch fire. My spirits revived. I took the saber off the wall, unsheathed it, and looked at it, deep in thought. This saber had been my toy when I was still in swaddling-clothes, the comfort and exercise of my adolescent years; why should it not now be my defense and glory in the military sphere? "I will wear you with honor," I said, kissed the blade, and returned it to its scabbard. The sun rose. That day Mama presented me with a gold chain, and Papa, three hundred rubles; even my little brother gave me his gold watch. As I accepted my parents' gifts, I thought sorrowfully that they had no idea that they were outfitting me for a distant and dangerous road.

I spent the day with my girl friends. At eleven o'clock in the evening I came to say good-night to Mama as I usually did before going to bed. Unable to suppress my emotions, I kissed her hands several times and clasped them to my heart, something I had never done before nor dared to do. Although Mama didn't love me, she was moved by these extraordinary effusions of childlike affection and obedience; kissing me on the head, she said, "Go with God!" These words held a great significance for me, who had never before heard a single affectionate word from my mother. I took them as a blessing, kissed her hand for the last time, and left.

My rooms were in the garden. I occupied the ground floor of our little garden house, and Papa lived upstairs. He was in the habit of coming to see me for half an hour every evening. He enjoyed hearing me tell him where I had gone and what I had been doing or reading. Now, as I waited for my father's customary visit, I laid my Cossack apparel on the bed behind the curtain, set an armchair by the stove, and stood beside it to wait for Papa to come to his rooms. Soon I heard the rustle of leaves under the footsteps of someone coming down the lane. My heart leaped! The door opened, and Papa came in. "Why are you so pale?" he asked, sitting down in the armchair. "Are you well?"

With an effort I suppressed the sigh that threatened to rend my breast. This was the last time that my father would come into my room with the assurance of finding his daughter there. Tomorrow he would pass it in grief, with a shudder. It would hold only a sepulchral void and silence!

Papa looked fixedly at me, "But what's wrong with you? You must be ill."

I said that I was only tired and chilled.

"Why don't you have them heat your room? It's getting damp and cold." After a short silence Papa asked, "Why don't you order Efim to run Alcides on a lunge? There's no getting near him. You yourself haven't ridden him for a long time, and you won't permit anyone else to do it.

He's so restive that he rears up even in his stall; you really must exercise him."

I said that I would order it done and fell silent again.

"You seem melancholy, my friend. Goodnight; go to bed," said Papa, getting up and kissing my forehead. He put one arm around me and pressed me to his breast. I kissed both his hands, trying to hold back the tears which were already flooding my eyes. The quivering of my body betrayed the emotions in my heart. Alas! Papa ascribed it to the cold. "You see, you're chilled through," he said. I kissed his hands once more. "My sweet daughter!" said Papa, patting my cheek. He went out. I knelt beside the armchair he had sat in and bowed to the ground before it, kissing and washing with my tears the spot where his foot had rested.

Half an hour later, when my sorrow had abated somewhat, I got up to take off my female clothing. I went over to the mirror, cut off my curls, and put them away in a drawer. I took off my black satin dressing-gown and began putting on my Cossack uniform. After I had tied the black silk sash around my waist and put on the high cap with a crimson crown, I spent a quarter of an hour studying my transformed appearance. My cropped hair gave me a completely different countenance. I was certain that nobody would ever suspect my sex.<sup>17</sup>

A loud rustle of leaves and the snort of a horse told me that Efim was leading Alcides into the rear yard. For the last time I stretched my arms to the image of the Mother of God which had received my prayers for so many years and went out. The door of my father's house finally closed behind me, and—who knows?—perhaps it might never be open to me again!

I ordered Efim to take Alcides by the direct road to Startsev mountain and wait for me at the edge of the forest. I ran hastily to the bank of the Kama and dropped my dressing-gown there, leaving it on the sand with all the trappings of female dress. I was not so barbarous as to intend for my father to think that I had drowned, and I was convinced he would not do so. I only wanted to make it possible for him to answer without confusion any embarrassing questions from our short-witted acquaintances. After leaving the clothing on the bank, I took a goat track which led directly uphill. The night was cold and clear, and the moon was shining at its fullest. I stopped for one last look at the beautiful and majestic view that opened out from the mountain: beyond the river, Perm and Orenburg provinces were visible to a boundless distance. Vast, dark forests and mirror lakes were displayed as if in a painting. The city at the foot of the precipitous mountain slumbered in the midnight hush. The

17. Durova's service record (Nov. 6, 1807) describes her as about 5'5" tall and having a swarthy, pock-marked face, light brown hair, and hazel eyes (Saks, 18).

### The Cavalry Maiden

18

moon's rays played on and were reflected from the gilt domes of the cathedral and shone on the roof of the house where I grew up. . . . What were my father's thoughts now? Did his heart tell him that tomorrow his beloved daughter would no longer come to wish him good morning?

In the nocturnal silence Efim's shout and Alcides' powerful snort came distinctly to my hearing. I ran toward them, and I was just in time: Efim was shivering with cold and cursing Alcides, whom he could not manage, and me for my delay. I took my horse from his hands, mounted, gave him the fifty rubles I had promised him, and begged him not to say anything to Papa. Then I released Alcides' reins and disappeared in a flash from the dumbfounded Efim's view.

Alcides galloped at the same rapid pace for four versts but then, since I had to cover fifty versts that night to reach the hamlet where I knew the Cossack regiment had been assigned to halt, I reined in my steed's quick gallop and went at a walk. Soon I came into a dark pine forest some thirty versts across. Wishing to conserve Alcides' strength, I kept him walking and, surrounded by the deathly hush of the forest and the dark of the autumn night, I became absorbed in my own thoughts: And so I'm at liberty. Free! Independent! I have taken the freedom that is rightfully mine—the freedom that is a precious gift from heaven, the inalienable prerogative of every human being! I have found a way to take it and guard it from all future claims against it; from now to my grave, it will be my portion and my reward!

Storm clouds covered the sky. The forest became so dark that I could not see twenty feet ahead of me, and at last a cold north wind rose, forcing me to step up my pace. Alcides broke into a full trot, and at dawn I arrived in the hamlet where the Cossack regiment had spent their day of rest.

### NOTES OF THE CAVALRY MAIDEN