

# The Captain's Daughter

*A. Pushkin*

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This is a melodramatic tale in the tradition of Hoffmann. The author spins a yarn that makes up a good engrossing story without being burdened by unnecessary realism. A young man is sent away on a military career to learn discipline and hard work by his father, he himself a military man. The life of the army is seldom disciplined but conducive to an existence of indulgence, in which playing cards, drinking and engaging in pursuit of women, punctuated by the intermittent duel, are often the only resources to combat boredom. The young man has not distinguished himself in any way growing up. His education has been lapsidactical, his engagement almost non-existent. A few odds and ends he may have picked up, it is hard to keep a normally intelligent fellow in permanent and absolute ignorance.

So he takes off with his servant. The first fellow whom he meets at an inn he allows to beat him in cards owing him a substantial amount of money, much to the consternation of his elderly servant. Later on during a snowstorm, of which there is no shortage in Russia, he meets with a tramp and gives him, again to the consternation of his servant, a fur jacket, albeit far too small. The poor man accepts it gracefully.

Our man is assigned to a far away fortress in a godforsaken village. There he meets and befriends a fellow officer, a young man banished to this outpost due to a duel. This man has fallen in love with the commander's daughter, the captain's daughter of the title, but has been rebuffed, something that has hurt his vanity irreparably. The two friends predictably soon have a fall-out which can only end in one way, namely by a duel. Our man shows his mettle while fencing, after all as noted before, total ignorance is hard to maintain, and fencing he has picked up from his French tutor, if no French at all. But being momentarily distracted by the arrival of the daughter he is seriously wounded. He does recover eventually under the tender care of the young woman, with whom he predictably falls in love, arousing in addition the jealousy of his former friend, making a full and solid reconciliation impossible.

Time goes by and our young man is quite happy where he is, having a dotting young woman and her accommodating parents at his side. Meanwhile an impostor to the throne has started a rebellion, to which more and more peasants join, as success breeds success. One day it is the turn of his village fortress to be attacked. They have nothing to set against the attacking hordes save an old disused cannon which is brought out in haste and manages to do nothing beyond minimal damage. The commandant and his wife are hanged, their daughter though manages to hide. The former friend has turned traitor and joined the victors, while our young man is about to be hanged. However, the impostor turns out to be the poor vagrant they had met a long time ago, and he is given a reprieve as a token of gratitude. Just as in the classical fairy-tale, do not ignore the seemingly insignificant and useless, whether a small deed is performed or not can have momentous consequences later on. Consequently the same evening a kind of friendship is established

between the two, built on the courage and the sincerity of our young man, whose decision not to betray his cause and soldierly honor, meets with the respect of the impostor. Once again, as in a fairy-tale, the right cause of action is never obvious, and often the counter-intuitive choice seems to be the fortunate one. He is given free passage and returns to a better protected fortress, where he can continue his military duties while the fortress is being besieged, During the siege, he gets wind that his beloved woman is being kept captive by his former friend with the intention of marrying her, and all what that entails. This is clearly a case of a fate worse than death and our valiant man sets out through the enemy lines to recuse her. He is well received by the impostor and given an escort out of the village with his woman at his side, the romanticism of the quest greatly appealing to the great rough.

Then there seems to be a variance of endings written by Pushkin, one of which is included in the translation. They all bear upon the inevitable ambiguity of the position of our young man. How can he maintain friendly relations with the impostor without being in league with him? The punishment of the latter obviously being death. He is charged and condemned and eventually has his death sentence commuted in consideration of the good record of his father. Meanwhile the captain's daughter has joined his parents and won their affection and consequent blessing for the union. Needless to add, they having been dead set against it at the beginning. Yet, what love is worthy of its name if it has not engendered parental opposition? And one can once again conclude that all is well that ends well.

So what to make of it? As noted it is written in the same tradition as the tales of a Hoffmann. This is very understandable, at the time of Pushkin no real Russian literature existed. Pushkin introduced the poetic idiom into the Russian literary tradition, a view which is singularly uncontroversial, and in his tales he also breaks new territory although probably not with the same seriousness of purpose. Realism is not the first concern of a burgeoning literary tradition, which has very little to build upon save fairy-tales and fantastic stories which always belong to any oral tradition.

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