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SUVÓROFF

BY
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SUVÓROFF.

CHAPTER I.

CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH.

ALEXANDER SUVÓROFF was born in Moscow on the 24th November, 1729, in the same year as his great benefactress the Empress Catherine. His family was of Swedish extraction. In 1622 one Suvor crossed the Baltic and, settling in Northern Russia, left descendants who became faithful subjects of the Czars. Basil Suvóroff, his father, likewise a soldier, attained the grade of general and the dignity of senator. He was, it appears, well-educated for those times, having actually translated Vauban's works into Russian. He lived during Suvóroff's childhood in retirement, either at Moscow or at the family estate at Rojdestveno in its vicinity. It was the reign of the Empress Anne, whose minister and favourite, the notorious Biron, gradually drove all Russians from office in favour of his German countrymen. Fortunate were they who, forgotten in the obscurity of exile, escaped persecution. Basil Suvóroff was among the number, and employed his leisure on the education of his son. On the accession of

Elizabeth, however, he was restored to active employment, and occupied important posts during the Seven Years' War. Young Sasha (or Sandy) being a sickly child and of small stature, was destined for a civil career. In those days it was customary to enroll children of noble parents in regiments as privates—generally in the Guards—and frequently at their very birth; thus when they were old enough to join they had become officers. This was not done in Sasha's case for the above reason; so he had to join as private and work through all the military grades. This placed him at a disadvantage, in one respect, but the completeness of his professional knowledge was due to the circumstance.

Notwithstanding physical frailty, Sasha burned with martial ardour. Bodily defects he tried to remedy by continual exercise and exposure to hardship. The tedious leisure hours of country life were devoted to military history and the memoirs of great commanders. Plutarch, Quintus Curtius, Cornelius Nepos, and Cæsar were his favourite authors. His model hero, however, was Charles XII., to whose character his own bore some resemblance; though the prudence which tempered his valour might seem foreshadowed by his partiality for the campaigns of Montecuccoli. Nor was his attention monopolized by military subjects, for he is said to have perused the philosophical writings of the day. He was a good linguist, or he could not, in that age, have been an extensive reader; for the day of Russian literature, had not yet dawned. He read French, German, Polish, and Italian in youth, acquired other tongues subsequently, and—still more remarkable accomplishment in

those days—he spoke and wrote his native Russian with elegance and propriety. But the father grew discontented with his studious son, being of opinion that he spent too much time in his chamber, poring over books and maps, for he rarely appeared in the family circle.

Sasha was now twelve years old and the question had to be decided: Was he to be a soldier? The father adhered to his own views; but the son was obstinately bent on a military career. And thus the point was decided. An old comrade of the father's, a General "Hannibal," resided in the neighbourhood. He was a negro; had been carried off from the shores of Africa in childhood and purchased in the slave-market in Constantinople by the Russian ambassador, who sent him as a present to Peter the Great. The Czar caused him to be baptized "Hannibal," educated in France, and placed in the Russian army, in which he attained the rank of general, dying at the ripe old age of ninety-two. One day this dusky warrior, calling on the elder Suvóroff, heard him complain about Sasha's unsocial behaviour. "Where is he?" asked Hannibal, "I will go speak to him." "Up in his bedroom as usual," replied the father. Hannibal soon discovered the culprit amid maps, classical authors, histories, and biographies; but was so charmed with the evidence of precocious talent which was thus afforded, that he interceded with Suvóroff, and finally persuaded him to allow Sasha to pursue the career of his choice.*

In 1741 then, at twelve years of age, young Sasha was

* Hannibal was a maternal ancestor of Pushkin's. The poet's features bear witness to his Moorish descent.

enrolled in the Simeónowsky regiment of Guards, and during the five ensuing years was instructed in the military profession under his father's roof and supervision. At the expiration of this term, that is, at the age of seventeen, he joined his regiment as a private, and, we are informed, performed the duties of that humble rank in an exemplary manner. Such was his zeal that he cleaned his arms and accoutrements with his own hands, instead of employing a batman, as custom permitted. True, he did not reside in barracks, but outside—that he might prosecute his studies undisturbed; yet he loved their precincts and mixed freely with the soldiery, among whom he speedily became a favourite. Passionately fond of drill, he would persuade his comrades to do a little privately “just to oblige him.” The character of the man was foreshadowed in the conduct of the youth. He affected a laconic style in speech and correspondence; would reply to importunate interrogators, “*Ucheess*,” or “Find out;” and here is a specimen of his correspondence with his father: “Hail, I am serving and studying. Alexander Suvóroff.” His comrades looked upon him as a *chudák*, or “oddity;” and not unnaturally. For, when taunted with unsociability, he used to retort that he could not abandon old friends for new. His old friends were Quintus Curtius, Cæsar, and the rest. Persistent in study, he not only learnt the army regulations by heart, and hammered away at drill, but obtained moral influence over his fellows—main-spring of his power in after years. These early peculiarities deserve notice, as bearing on the question: To what extent were they adopted for a purpose, and how far the result of individual temperament?

A piece of luck soon befell this “oddity.” When on sentry at Monplaisir, a kind of summer pavilion by the sea-shore at Peterhof, he attracted the notice of the Empress Elizabeth. Promenading in the gardens, she passed his post, when the young soldier saluted so smartly that the imperial lady, in spite of his low stature,” was struck by his appearance and inquired his name, on learning which she exhorted him to become as good a soldier as his father before him, and presented him with a silver rouble. But the young sentry replied that it was against orders to accept money when on duty. Whereupon she, “patting him on the cheek,” exclaimed: “Ah, my fine fellow you know your duty,” placed the coin on the ground, and told him to pick it up when relieved. In this he did not fail, nor to preserve it with veneration to the end of his days. About this time he essayed composition, made verses, and contributed to the only periodical his country then boasted. His article was entitled “Conversations in the Realms of the Dead,” and being signed with the initial S., was attributed to Sumaróhoff, then considered a literary master, and it was in consequence extravagantly lauded. Alexander the Great is represented as exhorting Herostratus to observe the difference between true glory and an insane desire for notoriety. Montezuma inculcates on Herman Cortes that “mercy is indispensable to the character of a hero.”

Not till 1754 was Suvóroff, being then twenty-five years of age, promoted lieutenant in a marching regiment. His advancement was thus slow at first in comparison with luckier contemporaries. Yet fortune not unfrequently redresses her wrongs with extreme rapidity,