

THE PISTOL SHOT

By ALEXANDER PUSHKIN

WE were in camp in the village of —. Every one knows the life of an officer of the line: in the morning drill and horseback exercise; then comes dinner with the colonel of the regiment, or else at the Jewish restaurant; and at night drinks and cards. At — there were no entertainments of any kind, for no one had a marriageable daughter to bring out. We spent our time in each other's quarters, and at our evening gatherings there were uniforms only.

However, there was one man in our set who was not a soldier. He must have been about thirty-five and consequently we looked upon him as quite old. His experience had great weight with us, and besides his reserve, his grand air and sarcastic manner made a deep impression on us young men. There seemed to be something mysterious about his life. He looked like a Russian, tho he bore a foreign name. In days gone by he had been in a regiment of Hussars, where he was quite prominent at one time; but suddenly he had sent in his resignation, no one knew why, and had retired to this poor out-of-the-way village, where he fared very badly, while at the same time spending much money. He always wore a shabby overcoat and still he kept open house where every officer was made welcome. To tell the truth, his dinners generally consisted of two or three simple dishes prepared by his servant, an old discharged soldier, but the champagne always flowed. No one knew anything of his circumstances or his means, and no one dared ask him any questions on the subject. There were plenty of books in his house—mostly military—and a few novels. He lent them willingly and never asked for them again; on the other hand, he never returned those he borrowed. His one pastime was pistol shooting. The walls of his room were riddled with bullets, giving it the appearance of a honeycomb. A rich collection of pistols was the only luxury to be seen in the miserable house he occupied. The accuracy of his aim was remarkable, and if he had taken a bet that he could shoot the pompon on a helmet, not one of us would have hesitated to put the helmet on. Sometimes we talked of dueling, but Silvio [I will give him that name] never opened his lips on the subject. If some one asked him had he ever fought a duel, he answered shortly that he had, and that was all; he never entered into any particulars and it was evident that he disliked being asked such questions. We surmised that the death of one of his victims had left a blight on his life. Never for a minute would any of us have thought that he could have been guilty of faintheartedness. There are some people whose very appearance precludes such an idea.

One day eight or ten of our officers were dining at Silvio's. We drank as much as usual, that is, excessively. When dinner was over, we begged of our host to take the bank in a game of faro. After refusing to do so, for he seldom played, he finally called for cards and laying fifty

ducats on the table before him, he sat down and shuffled. We formed in a circle about him and the game began. When playing Silvio never uttered a word, neither objecting nor explaining. If a player made a mistake, he paid out exactly the amount due him or else credited it to himself. We were all familiar with his manner of playing and always let him have his own way. But on the day I speak of, there was with us an officer newly arrived who, through absent-mindedness, doubled his stakes on a certain card. Silvio took the chalk and marked down what was due him. The officer, convinced that there was a mistake, made some objections. Silvio, still mute, went on dealing as if he had not heard. The officer, out of patience by this time, took the brush and wiped off the figures. Silvio picked up the chalk and wrote them down again. At this, the officer, excited by the wine, by the play, and the laughter of his comrades, and thinking he had been insulted, took up a brass candlestick and hurled it at Silvio, who by bending aside, averted the blow. Great was the uproar! Silvio rose, pale with rage, and with eyes blazing:

"My dear sir," he said, "you will please leave this room, and be thankful that this has happened in my house."

Not one of us doubted the outcome of this fray, and we all looked upon

our new comrade as a dead man. The officer went out saying he was ready to meet the banker just as soon as it was convenient. The game proceeded a few minutes longer, but it was evident that the master of the house was not paying much attention to what was going on; we all left, one by one, and returned to our quarters discussing the while the vacancy in our ranks which was sure to take place.

Mysterious Silvio Refuses to Challenge

Next morning, while at riding exercise, we all wondered if the poor lieutenant were dead or alive, when, to our surprise, he appeared among us. We plied him with questions and he answered that he had had no challenge from Silvio, which caused us all much surprise. We called on Silvio and found him in his yard, firing bullet after bullet at an ace nailed to the door. He received us in his usual manner, never mentioning the scene of the night before. Three days went by and the lieutenant was still alive. We kept saying to each other: "Will Silvio not fight?" amazed at such a thing. But Silvio did not fight. He simply gave a very lame explanation and that was all that was said.

This forbearance on his part did him much harm among us young men. A want of courage is never quite forgiven by youth, for to him fearless-

ness is the greatest quality one can possess and it excuses many faults. Still, after a while, all this was forgotten and by degrees Silvio regained his old ascendancy over us.

I, alone, could never feel the same toward him. Being of a romantic turn of mind, I had loved this man, whose life was an enigma to us all, more than any one else, and I had made him, in my thoughts, the hero of some mysterious drama. And he liked me, of this I felt sure, for when we were alone, dropping his sharp and sarcastic speeches, he would converse on all sorts of subjects, and unbend to me in a fascinating manner. Ever since that unlucky evening I speak of, the fact that he had been insulted and had not wiped out the offense in blood, worried me to such an extent that I never could feel at ease with him as in the days gone by. I even avoided looking at him, and Silvio was too clever and quick not to notice and guess at the reason. He seemed to me to feel it deeply. On two occasions, I thought I detected a wish on his part to explain matters, but I avoided him and he did not follow me. After that I never saw him except when others were present, and we never again resumed our intimate talks.

Those happy mortals who live in cities where there is so much to see and do can never imagine how important certain small happenings can

become in an out-of-the-way village or town. One of these is the arrival of the mail. Tuesdays and Fridays, the offices of our regiment were besieged with men. One expected money, another a letter, and again others looked for newspapers. As a rule, everything was opened and read on the spot; news was given and the improvised postoffice was full of animation. Silvio's letters were addressed in care of our regiment and he called for them with us. One day a letter was handed to him, the seal of which he broke hurriedly. While reading it his eyes flashed with suppressed excitement. None of the officers but myself noticed this, as they were all busy reading their own letters.

"Gentlemen," said Silvio, "business compels me to leave town immediately. I must go tonight. I hope none of you will refuse to dine with me for the last time. I will expect you," said he, turning to me pointedly. "I hope you will not disappoint me."

After saying which he went away in great haste, and we all retired to our own quarters, agreeing to meet at his house later.

I arrived at Silvio's at the hour he had named and found almost the whole regiment there. Everything he possessed was packed and the bare walls riddled with bullets stared back at us. We sat down to dinner and our host was in such a jovial mood that before long we were all in the greatest of spirits. Corks flew about; the froth rose in our glasses, which we refilled as rapidly as they emptied. We all felt great affection for our host and wished him a pleasant journey, with joy and prosperity at the end of it. It was very late when we got up from the table and while we were all picking out our caps in the hall, Silvio took me by the hand and detained me as I was about to leave.

"I must speak to you," he said in a low tone.

So I remained after the others went away, and, seated facing each other, we smoked our pipes in silence for a while. Silvio seemed worried, and there was no trace of the feverish gaiety he had displayed in the earlier part of the evening. This dreadful pallor, the brilliancy of his eyes, and the long puffs of smoke he blew from his mouth gave him the appearance of a fiend. After a few minutes he broke the silence.

"It may be," he said, "that we will never see each other again; before we part, I wish to explain certain things to you. You have noticed, perhaps, that I attach little importance to the average man's opinion, but I like you and I feel that I cannot leave without seeing you think better of me than you do."

He stopped to shake the ashes out of his pipe. I remained silent and avoided looking at him.

"It may have seemed strange to you," he continued, "that I did not ask any satisfaction from that drunkard, that young fool R—. You will admit that, having the choice of weapons, he was at my mercy and that there was not much chance of his killing me. I might call it generosity on my part, but I will not

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THE RAT by Thyra Samter Winslow

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Jerome hesitated. Sat down. Dr. Bradley went to the door. Called the trained nurse in. "Miss Weston can confirm most of my discoveries," he went on. "My two conferees, too, know much of what I'm about to tell you."

"When I first went to the sanitarium I did the usual work," Dr. Bradley sat down. "I saw patients. Looked at charts. That's a well-run sanitarium you have there, gentlemen!"

The other two doctors nodded. "Only Mrs. Hamilton didn't fit into her groove. The symptoms for which she was committed were plain enough, almost too much according to type, in fact. But a paranoiac gets worse, not better. And here was Mrs. Hamilton, talking with every one, making friends with the nurses, reading, assisting with the patients. It wasn't right. I recommended that she be discharged."

"But now she's ill again. The same symptoms!" Jerome Hamilton's voice was excited, higher than it should have been.

"Exactly! Isn't that curious? Or rather, it isn't curious, because I know the answers. They weren't hard to fathom, once you got the hang of it."

"Miss Weston, will you bring in our discoveries," he nodded to the nurse who went into the hall, and returned with the unkempt man whom Laura had seen following her.

"You see," Dr. Bradley went on, "it's rather odd for a patient to find only one man following her. So, when Mrs. Hamilton came home, Miss Weston happened to be in the neighborhood—and followed Mrs. Hamilton's follower."

The man hung his head. "I was out of work," he said, "and when I got a job to follow a woman—not to talk to her, just to follow her around it seemed too good not to take."

"Of course!" said Dr. Bradley, and nodded. Miss Weston took the man out and came back with a small machine.

"It's a talking machine. Very simple type," Dr. Bradley explained. "It's been in a closet with only a thin wall separating it from Mrs. Hamilton's room. And slots in the wood base of the closet—and into the room, made the sounds audible."

Miss Weston adjusted the record. A thin, screeching voice said "Lauraaa"! And there were the moans that Laura had listened to in such terror and anguish.

"The food and the salt for Mrs. Hamilton had been treated with sodium nitrite and nitroglycerine. That had caused the low blood pressure, the headaches, and the bitter taste to the food. It's all very simple, isn't it?"

The Guilty Husband Is Caught in Time

Laura was crying now. Dr. Bradley walked over to her, put an arm around her shoulder.

"It's over now," he said. "Your real troubles are over. There are details, of course. Mr. Hamilton has managed to get away with quite a bit of your property. He had himself appointed the guardian of your person and property—he got permission from the court not to have you present at the hearing—said it would affect your health. There's a lot left, luckily. We caught him in time. You've still your home—many of

your bonds—but, of course, if you go to court—"

"I don't want to go to court," said Laura. "Not about that. Just to be free! That's all!"

"You can manage that," said Dr. Bradley. And Laura, looking at him, felt that he wouldn't be satisfied just with her freedom. And, suddenly, she was happy!

"What made you first know I was all right?" she asked. "All patients say they are sane. How could you tell?"

"You looked sane," he said. "You acted sane, too. But I wasn't sure. Not until you told me about the rat."

"Why? What about that?"

"You said you saw the rat in the daytime. And that it was a white rat. Rats are nocturnal feeders—they don't come out much during the day. And albino or white rats don't run wild—I used too many rats in experiments at medical school not to know about them."

"But if the rats were in my imagination!"

"You'd never have imagined just those things, I felt sure. I knew, then, that a white rat had been planted by some one for the purpose of frightening you. Then everything else fitted in. It was easy after that."

The other two doctors arose. They still looked a bit unbelieving and bewildered. They shook hands pompously with Dr. Bradley. Congratulated him. Shook hands with Laura. Congratulated her. They would have spoken to Jerome, but Jerome, with a look in which darkness and relief mingled, was leaving the room. They even congratulated Miss Weston.

"To think that a rat was at the bottom of it all!" one murmured to the other as they went out.