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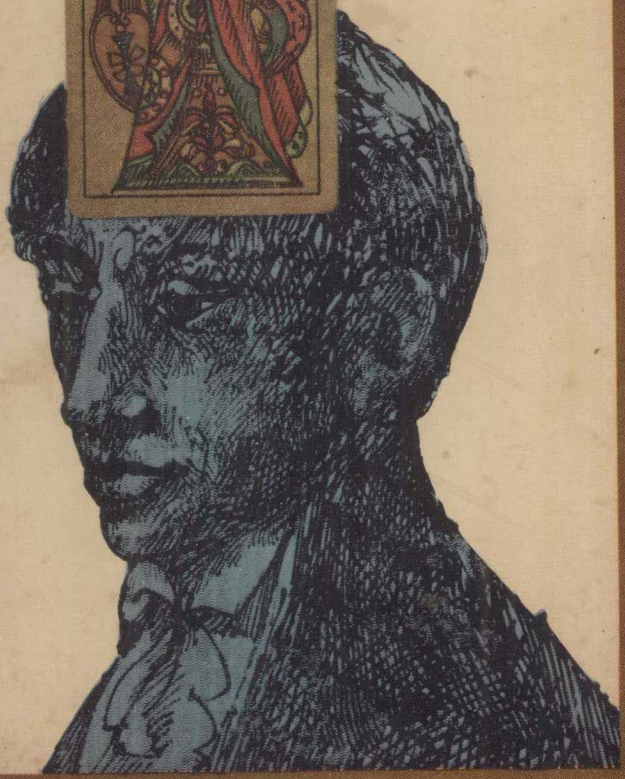
Alexander Pushkin

The Queen of Spades

and other tales



A Signet Classic

Alexander Pushkin

ALEXANDER PUSHKIN was born of an ancient boyar family in Moscow in 1799. He was educated at the lyceum of Tsarkoe Selo. In 1817 he joined the ministry of foreign affairs and mingled with the gay society of Moscow until he was exiled to the south of Russia because of a poem, "Ode to Liberty," which he had circulated in manuscript. In 1820 he visited the baths of the Caucasus for the sake of his health and here read the poetry of Byron. He received an official appointment in Odessa in 1823, but was dismissed from the service because of his inclination toward atheism. His great tragedy *Boris Godunov* was published in 1831. Pushkin narrowly escaped being implicated in the Decembrist (1825) conspiracy by burning all his personal papers. The emperor, after his coronation, praised and befriended him. In 1830 he published *The Tales of Ivan Belkin* and in 1831 he completed his poem *Eugene Onegin.* Dubrovsky was published in 1833. *The Captain's Daughter* (1836), his one completed novel, greatly influenced Russian writing of the nineteenth century. Pushkin died in 1837—the victim of a duel with his brother-in-law—leaving behind his wife and four children. D'Anthès, his opponent, was expelled from the country. In 1880 a statue of Pushkin was erected in Moscow. The author has been acknowledged by practically every subsequent Russian writer as the father of Russian literature.

the QUEEN of SPADES

AND OTHER TALES

by Alexander Pushkin

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With a Foreword by
GEORGE STEINER

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Foreword

Books are like wine. Some are best savored on home ground; others can travel without losing their distinctive quality. Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, and Chekhov belong to the world's common store of vintage. Even where translations are bad, their power and essential meaning have come through the barriers of language and cultural remoteness. These masters are revered in Russia also. Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky are published in vast inexpensive editions; Chekhov is widely performed. But it is not their works that the Russian regards as his *supreme* inheritance. That place is accorded to Pushkin alone. And the Russian will say to you: perhaps *War and Peace, The Brothers Karamazov,* or *The Cherry Orchard* can be translated; but Pushkin cannot. You must learn Russian in order to read him. Only then will you experience the full genius of our language and spirit. "For a Russian not to understand Pushkin," wrote Dostoyevsky, "means to be deprived of the right to call himself a Russian."

The reasons for Pushkin's pre-eminence are in part historical. Russian literature begins with Pushkin. There are Slavonic religious texts, chronicles, and heroic sagas such as the renowned *Song of Igor.* But during the centuries in which European literature came to ripeness, the tyrannies and isolation of Russian life imposed upon the genius of the Russian tongue a virtual silence. As imperial Russia gradually opened windows to the west during the late eighteenth century, that silence was broken—but only in a timid, servile fashion. Russian poets and romancers pro-

duced pallid imitations of the French neoclassics or tried to assume the new, lyric posture of sentimentality and Byronic romanticism.

Pushkin came upon the scene like lightning. Nearly at one stroke he released those energies of style and vision which were to carry Russian literature to world rank. He initiated that golden century which extends from his own performance in the 1820's and 1830's to the gray dawn of Stalinism. It was as if the range and brilliance of Pushkin's art had opened the gates to a long-contained surge of literary power. Gogol, Lermontov, Turgenev, Goncharov, Tolstoy, Dostoyevsky, Chekhov, Gorky, Mayakovsky, Blok, Pasternak—the list of men and of the masterpieces they produced in a hundred years form a tradition of excellence such as we find at only two other moments in the history of Western literature, in the Athens of Pericles and in Elizabethan England. But each of these writers tells us that he could not have done his own work, that neither the language nor the sensibility would have been ready for him, had Pushkin not gone before. Without *The Queen of Spades* or *The Undertaker,* Russian literature might not have achieved its characteristic mastery of the short narrative. Behind *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina* stand Pushkin's tales of military and social life, his appropriation of history to the purposes of fiction. *Boris Godunov* is both the first and greatest of Russian dramas. Down to the present time and the lyrics of Pasternak, there have been few intonations in Russian poetry that cannot be traced back to Pushkin. "He was," said Gogol, "not only a Russian, but the first Russian."

By this, moreover, Gogol meant something which goes far beyond style or the establishment of literary conventions. Pushkin gave to Russian literature its primary task and meaning: he made of it the instrument of social criticism and moral protest which it has remained to this day. That is the core of his greatness. Harassed by censorship, hounded by court spies and enemies from within his own aristocratic circle, in turn threatened and cajoled by Emperor Nicolas himself, Pushkin was able to make of his

work a covert but unmistakable critique of the backwardness and oppression of life under the tsars. Dostoyevsky put it starkly: "Pushkin was the first to declare that the Russian *is not a slave.*" Such a declaration, even where it is concealed in the allegory of *The Bronze Horseman,* Pushkin's most famous poem, or behind the historical mask of the scenes of popular life in *Boris Godunov,* took formidable courage. But neither political exile nor the premonition that the hostile, suffocating atmosphere of the imperial court would bring on his own death prevented Pushkin from using his poetic talent toward moral and radical ends.

Russian literature has never renounced the dangerous privilege of social awareness which Pushkin first claimed for it. The most effective revolutionaries in Russian life prior to 1917 were the writers. Where freedom of speech or of political inquiry hardly existed, literature took upon itself the burden of protest and ideology. Turgenev's *Sportsman's Sketches,* Dostoyevsky's *Possessed,* the novels of Tolstoy, and the stories of Chekhov and Gorky were major political acts. Long before the forces of opposition had gained any coherence, Russian novelists foretold the coming of the storm. High in the electric air they have been the weathercocks of Russian history. All Russian tyrannies, whether imperial or Bolshevik, have honored the writers in their midst with constant vigilance and frequent persecution. To be a Russian writer has always been a noble but dangerous profession. Both the nobility and the peril were first exemplified in the art of Pushkin. When Lenin urged young Communists to pay less heed to party hacks and to return to a study of Pushkin, he was displaying the taste of a connoisseur and not the designs of a politician.

Pushkin gave to Russian literature not only its sense of moral and social direction but also its principal stylistic attitude. One might call it lyric realism. Much of the finest of Russian poetry and fiction makes its statements about human values in a manner at once concrete and allegoric. Having to work against the grain of censorship, it gives

to its urgent, radical view of society a poetic cast. This is as true of Dostoyevsky as it is of Chekhov or Pasternak. It is via a narrative of private lives and intimate feelings that the Russian writer argues his political and philosophic convictions. This projection of private destiny against the larger, ominous background of political circumstance is characteristic of Pushkin. It accounts for the unique authority of *Evgeni Onegin* in the history of Russian feeling.

Begun in the summer of 1823 and completed in October, 1831, *Evgeni Onegin* is the high point of Pushkin's achievement. It is a novel in verse which tells how Onegin, a rootless, Byronic young man, throws away the life of his friend and his own chance at happiness. He does so through a somber frivolity of soul. Nearly all the motifs and character-types of the classic Russian novel and of the theater of Chekhov are contained in this one work. Onegin, Lensky, and Tatania play in the mythology of Russian consciousness the kind of determining role played by Hamlet and Faust in their respective cultures. They are the imagined beings around which a nation can crystallize its self-awareness. The scenery of *Evgeni Onegin*—the immemorial tedium of the country estate and the shallow glitter of St. Petersburg society—became the very emblem of Russian fiction. It instilled into the Russian literary imagination a constant polarity. Consider *War and Peace, Anna Karenina, The Sea-Gull, Doctor Zhivago*—in each, the narrative pendulum swings between rural and urban, between the dormant province and the fever of life in St. Petersburg or Moscow. Or take the matchless gallery of young women which Russian literature has produced: the Natashas, the Kittys, the Laras—grave, lyric beings, yet with their feet firmly on the ground. All are shaken out of Tatania's sleeve.

So far, *Evgeni Onegin* is hardly accessible to readers who have no Russian. Its "limpid harmonies . . . the multiple melodies reverberating through its stanzas . . . its precise and luminous images . . . the unique purity of its Russian diction" have defied adequate translation. Soon this may be remedied. Vladimir Nabokov has completed an Eng-

lish version; though unpublished, it is already something of a legend. When it becomes available, the English-speaking reader will be able to judge for himself the place held by *Evgeni Onegin* in Pushkin's work as a whole, and he will perceive why it is that the Russians look upon Pushkin as essentially and supremely their own.

But does this essential "Russianness" make Pushkin's work difficult of approach for an American audience? Is he, like two of his romantic contemporaries, Leopardi in Italy and Hölderlin in Germany, confined to his own language and atmosphere by the very intensity of his national character? I think not. Indeed, anyone who comes to Pushkin, notably to his stories and short novels, from an American background will have certain distinct advantages. He will experience a shock of familiarity.

If this seems paradoxical, it is only because the bitter events of the last fifteen years and the narrow focus of the cold war have obscured a much larger truth. Seen from the vantage point of the historian, the contrarieties between Russia and America are often artificial. There are, between the destinies and inward experience of the two giants, profound analogues. In crucial respects of psychology and material setting, Russia and America are closer to each other than either is to western Europe. Three of the acutest minds of the nineteenth century recognized this fact: de Tocqueville, Matthew Arnold, and Henry Adams. Adams went further: he prophesied that the two great land masses, driven by similar energies and purposes, would one day confront each other implacably across the remnants of Europe.

During the nineteenth century, both Russia and America had before them an open frontier. The European eye looked upon a landscape bounded by ancient political and geographical enclosures. The novels of Balzac, Dickens, and Flaubert depend richly on a sense of limited and thoroughly explored space. The cities and landscapes of European fiction—Flaubert's Normandy, the Paris of Zola, Hardy's Wessex—glow with the patina of time and previous artistic treatment. The Russian and American consciousnesses, on

the other hand, were penetrated with a sense of vast open space and wilderness. Both nations were seeking psychological and material control over their own immensity. They had new worlds within their grasp.

Hence the similarity of myths and situation in classic Russian and American novels. The hero leaves the enervating comforts of the city to seek manhood and identity amid the bracing perils of the frontier. This quest, with its ancient intimations of man as hunter and fighter, is described repeatedly in the tales of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Tolstoy. The hero leaves St. Petersburg to fight amid the snow peaks and forests of the untamed Caucasus or to travel the eastern steppe. Precisely like the Indian brave in American mythology, the Caucasian tribesman is a noble savage—cruel, cunning, yet chivalrous in his ferocity. He is wedded to his wind-swift steed as is the Apache; his women are stoic, dark-eyed beauties. He is wild in victory and unyielding in defeat. In mortal encounter with him, the Russian officer is brought back to the forgotten virtues of simplicity, self-reliance, and sacrifice. Above all, he comes to realize that the land is greater and more enduring than his conquest of it. Looking upon the cold mountain brooks and prairies, the Tolstoyan hero recognizes the life of St. Petersburg and high society for what it is—a cruel, shallow contrivance.

To a reader of Fenimore Cooper and his myriad successors all this will be familiar. *Dubrovsky* and *The Captain's Daughter* are "wild west" stories. The incidents they recount have innumerable parallels in our own tradition. Replace the insurgent Bashkirs by Pawnees on the warpath, the Empress by the Great White Father in Washington, and *The Captain's Daughter* could be an American folk tale. All is familiar: the stockade, the young greenhorn on his first campaign, the initial victory of the marauders, and the thunder of cavalry hoofs on the avenging trail.

Both Russia and America, moreover, stood in a crucial, problematic relation to Europe. Even as Jefferson claimed for all enlightened Americans two homelands, their own

and France, so Dostoyevsky asserted, "we Russians have two motherlands, Russia and Europe." Both civilizations could only define their own voice and presence against the sounding board of western Europe. The journey to Paris, London, or Rome carries the same symbolic and psychological implications for Herzen, Turgenev, Tolstoy, or Dostoyevsky as it does for Washington Irving, Hawthorne, Henry James, and Melville. It is an act both of rejection and acceptance; looking back from alien ground, the Russian and American artists apprehend the virtues and failures of their own nations. Ivan Karamazov says to Alyosha:

> "I want to travel in Europe . . . I shall set off from here. And yet I know that I am only going to a graveyard, but it's a most precious graveyard, that's what it is! Precious are the dead that lie there, every stone over them speaks of such burning life in the past, of such passionate faith in their work, their truth, their struggle and their science, that I know I shall fall on the ground and kiss those stones and weep over them; though I'm convinced in my heart that it's long been nothing but a graveyard."

Surely this could be the motto for much of the best of American literature, from Hawthorne's *Marble Faun* and the novels of Henry James down to Hemingway and T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets.*

Pushkin experienced in its full tension and ambiguity the spell of Europe. His work has deep roots in the French eighteenth century, in Byron, and in the German romantics. *Boris Godunov* could scarcely exist without the precedent of Shakespeare and Schiller. *Evgeni Onegin* has behind it French versions of Byron's *Childe Harold* and *Don Juan.* In his *novellas,* Pushkin drew freely on Sir Walter Scott, Victor Hugo, and Bulwer Lytton. Yet at the same time he was resolved to liberate Russian literature from European domination. He sought to give to whatever he borrowed a true Russian guise. This tension between foreign precedent and native impulse gave to Pushkin's art its ironic texture.

We cannot get *The Queen of Spades* or *The Tales of*

Ivan Belkin into just focus unless we perceive the slight but decisive shift of the narrator away from the conventions of his narrative. Pushkin is using all the devices of European Gothic and sentimental fiction—the duels, the pallid young ladies, the fainting spells, the ghosts, the fantastic coincidences. *The Postmaster* or *Lady into Lassie* could have appeared in any of the countless anthologies of pathos or infatuation to which the European public thrilled between the 1790's and the 1840's. But there is a difference. Pushkin always stands just outside the story; he is committed to the economy of the narrative and to the truth of feeling, but not to the substance of the plot. And he rarely misses an occasion for ironic commentary. Thus the full grimness of *The Queen of Spades* only comes to light in one of the last, perfunctory sentences: "Lizaveta is bringing up a poor relative." At this one evil touch, the whole Gothic horror fable assumes a grave, social import.

Again, this kind of tension between the literary form and the underlying tone of the writer is familiar to us in American literature. Like Pushkin, Hawthorne and Poe borrowed from Europe the trappings of Gothic melodrama and sentimental romance. But they, too, used these trappings toward somber, idiosyncratic ends. Indeed, the sense of a contact between the worlds of Pushkin and Poe is, at times, vivid. *The Queen of Spades* and *The Undertaker* come out of the same atmosphere of haunted, yet slightly farcical malignity as *The Cask of Amontillado.*

By the very nature of the historical context, Russian and American artists of the nineteenth century had to create for their cultures aesthetic forms and ideals which would have relevance to common, essentially European values, yet be autonomous. It was an exacting task, and we feel the pressure of it behind the speed and diversity of Pushkin's achievement. Pushkin was killed at the age of thirty-eight in a duel which may have been engineered by his enemies at court. But in his brief span of life, he provided for Russian literature models in the three predominant genres—lyric verse, drama, and prose narrative. American literature was less fortunate. As Henry James points out,

the lack of an acknowledged master has provoked in American writing—whether it be in Melville, Thomas Wolfe, or Faulkner—a recurrent unsteadiness of taste and deficiency of proportion. The genius of Pushkin created for Russia a classic past.

But the notion of the classic applies not only to Pushkin's historical role; it also characterizes his art. In his stories there is no divorce between direct experience and imaginative form. Even where it derives from the suggestion of some other work, each of these tales has in it a strong element of personal life. Like the narrator of *The Captain's Daughter,* Pushkin served as an officer in the Caucasus. He was an accomplished gambler, at home in the setting of *The Queen of Spades,* and a redoubtable shot, like Silvio. He knew love under the passionate, somewhat melodramatic colors which we find in *Dubrovsky* and *Blizzard.* Pushkin's life is the last and most complete of Pushkin's stories.

His manner is classic in its hard surface and sparseness of means. Our habits of fiction have grown more dense and oblique. We expect from our novelists a gradual insinuation into character and motive. Pushkin is entirely direct: "Hermann saw a youthful face and black eyes. This moment decided his fate";

> Never had I seen one so brilliant and so favored by fortune! Figure to yourself youth, brains, looks, boisterous spirits, reckless courage, a resounding name, money which he expended lavishly and which never seemed to come to an end, and try and imagine the impression he was bound to make on us.

At times, we would want to know more about these characters; they spring upon us in too sharp a light. But it is precisely this simplicity of presentation, the author's sovereign control over his personages, which allows him to tell a story with complete economy. There is little in the repertoire of fiction to match Pushkin's rich conciseness. I doubt that one could retrench a single paragraph

from *The Queen of Spades* without impairing its structure; anything added would seem superfluous. Yet on how crowded a canvas has Pushkin traced his mocking tale.

Finally, there is in Pushkin's vision of conduct a classic stoicism. Beneath the conventional froth of romantic pathos and lyric sentiment runs a streak of harsh nobility. The fall of the stockade in *The Captain's Daughter* is grimly rendered. The Captain's wife sees her husband swinging on the gallows; she reviles his murderers:

> "Stop the old hag's tongue," said Pugachev. At this a young Cossack struck her over the head with his sword, and she fell dead on the steps of the porch. Pugachev took his departure. The people flocked after him.

No syllable is added in pity or extenuation. In Pushkin's world, courage and dignity of bearing are the principal ornaments of the soul. The poet himself was endowed with both. Mortally wounded on that 27th of January 1837, he raised himself on one arm to return his opponent's fire.

Now, more than a century later, his stories have lost none of their spell. Once the characters are set before us and the tale begins, we cannot choose but hear. Their fascination can be arrested neither by barriers of language nor by national or political antagonism. That is Pushkin's monument.

GEORGE STEINER