

The Queen of Spades

A. Pushkin

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What is so fascinating about gambling? Of course it is not the money that it can award, but the suspense. The balancing on the knife edge that separates triumph from disaster. The palpable presence of Fate. Of the possibility of luck just being around the corner. No wonder it can infuse jaded and bored minds with renewed vitality and excitement.

The story is about Hermann. A Russified German, a character not congenial to the Russian soul, too prudent, too calculating, too sane. Hermann is fascinated with gambling, but he does not partake of it himself, for that he is too sane, too prudent, but he loves to watch it. One night he is informed by a trick, that somebodies grandmother once in her life availed herself of. The secret was to play three cards in succession, and then never to play at all. In such a way she had recouped her losses in Paris in her youth. Our hero Hermann is obsessed by this. How to find out the secret? How to get in touch with the old lady, who by now is very old and a bit senile. He is bold, or rather desperate enough to get in touch with a young woman, the ward of the old lady. At first his pushiness repels her, but her curiosity (and diet on fashionable novels) gets the better of her and they soon engage in an epistolary interchange, which goes so far as to her setting up a nocturnal tryst to take place in her room after arriving from a ball. Our hero Hermann is less interested in an amorous dallying with a young beautiful lady, although it is served on a platter, than to get the secret out of the old lady. Thus his tryst turns out to be with the latter, and in spite of his entreaties and unabashed pleading she refuses to divulge her secret. In the end he produces a pistol out of frustration, and she gets so scared that she falls back and dies. He does, however, confess what transpired to the the young lady, whom he eventually visits. She is of course aghast at his callousness. No one really among the living resents the death of the old lady, whom they have a long time ago dismissed as a living dead. Nevertheless, or maybe because of, there is an ostentatious funeral, which our hero attends to make amends for having caused her death. Pushkin remarks sarcastically, that our hero had little religious feeling, but made up for it by superstition (in spite of being so ostensibly sane). His protestations at her coffin are so exaggerated that a distant relative whispers to an attending Englishman that he is a natural son. That night he is visited by the ghost of the departed that conveys to him her secret. Three, Seven and an Ace. Now, if not before, the story takes off from being ostensibly realistic to pure phantasy. But in a world ruled by superstition, this nocturnal visit does not necessarily mean that some barrier has been forced.

As Pushkin remarks, as little as two bodies can occupy the same space in the physical world, as little can two fixed ideas remain simultaneously in the brain of one obsessed. His whole world centers around those three cards which he sees embodied everywhere. Any romantic dalliance with the young lady is of course out of the question. He thinks of going to Paris to gamble where the stakes are at its highest, but an opportunity presents itself in

the Russian capital itself. It causes some raised eyebrows, that the dedicated non-gambler takes to the cards. Even more so when he stakes everything he has, and in cash to boot, complying to the demands of the head of the table - the rich gambler Chekalinsky, who presides of the proceedings in his house. When he also wins the first night, the sensation is a fact. He comes a second night and repeats his feat. Then there is the third and final, and the attention of everybody is on his gamble. And lo and behold, his ace would win the day. But inexplicably, instead of the ace he thought he laid down on the table, there is a Queen of Spades. The revenge of the old lady?

Our Hero goes insane, and that is the end of him, while the young ward makes a profitable marriage, and the grandson of the old lady, who once told the story, wins his princess.

It is a story told with verve, and with ironic detachment, as well as with colorful touches of contemporary life, which strikes the modern reader as piquant and out of a fairy-tale, although at the time it was real enough. The telling of a story in an artless way is not easy. Plot counts for very little, and can easily be borrowed, as was the case of Shakespeare. Given the frame, the imagination is provoked and inspired to fill it with contents. It is in the telling a story proves its mettle, just as the pie in the eating.

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