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QUEEN OF THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

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ALEXANDER PUSHKIN

*Tales of the Late  
Ivan Petrovich Belkin  
The Queen of Spades  
The Captain's Daughter  
Peter the Great's  
Blackamoor*

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THE QUEEN OF SPADES

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The queen of spades indicates some covert malice.  
(The latest fortune-telling manual)

They regard their joy

Thinking themselves very

rich.

They have daily access

Of my power.

Oh yes.

So, I can speak for you.

They shall all love the day.

Oh yes.

A fortune-telling manual...  
The queen of spades...  
indicates some covert malice.  
The latest fortune-telling manual...  
They regard their joy...  
Thinking themselves very rich...  
They have daily access...  
Of my power...  
Oh yes...  
So, I can speak for you...  
They shall all love the day...  
Oh yes...

## THE QUEEN OF SPADES

### I

If rain spoiled the day  
They would sit down to play  
Gladly;  
They wagered their pay  
Throwing hundreds away—  
Sadly.  
They kept chalky account  
Of any amount  
Owing.  
So, if rain spoiled the day,  
They would still keep the play  
Going.\*

One evening, Narumov of the Horse Guards played host to a card party. The long winter night passed unnoticed, and it was after four in the morning when they all sat down to supper. Those who had ended up ahead of the game ate heartily; the rest sat moodily before their empty plates. But champagne was produced, conversation revived, and everybody joined in.

'How did you get on, Surin?' the host enquired.

'Lost as usual. You must admit I have no luck at all. I play it straight, I never get carried away or lose concentration, and yet I just go down and down!'

'Haven't you ever once been tempted? Never backed a sequence? . . . I'm amazed at your will-power.'

'What about Hermann, then?' said one of the company, indicating a young engineer. 'Never handled a card in his life, never doubled a single stake, yet here he sits up till five watching us play.'

'I'm very taken with the game,' said Hermann. 'But I'm not in a position to sacrifice the necessary in the hope of acquiring the superfluous.\*'

'He's German. He counts the pennies, that's all it is,' Tomsky

put in. 'If there's anyone I can't fathom it's my grandmother, Countess Anna Fedotovna.'

'What was that? How do you mean?' The guests queried noisily.

'I just can't understand', Tomsy went on, 'how it is that my grandmother never gambles.'

'What's odd about that?' Narumov asked. 'An old lady of eighty not gambling?'

'You mean you really don't know anything about her?'

'No, honestly, nothing!'

'Well, in that case, lend an ear:

'I should tell you that about sixty years ago my grandmother went to Paris and became all the rage. People flocked after her for a glimpse of *la Vénus moscovite*; Richelieu laid siege to her and was on the point of shooting himself because of her cruelty, or so grandmother assures me. In those days the ladies used to play faro.\* On one occasion at court she lost a considerable sum to the Duke of Orleans. Back home, as she was peeling off her beauty-spots and undoing her hooped petticoat, she informed grandfather of her losses and instructed him to pay up. My late grandfather, as I recall, was a sort of major-domo to his wife. He was mortally afraid of her; however, when he heard of her appalling losses, he flew into a rage and fetched the accounts to demonstrate to her that she had got through half-a-million in six months, that they had no such estates near Paris as they had at Moscow and Saratov, and flatly refused to pay. Grandmother slapped his face and went to bed by herself, as a mark of her displeasure. Next day she sent for her husband, trusting that this domestic punishment had proved effective, but found him immovable. For the first time in her life she went so far as to argue with him and explain how matters stood; she thought to shame him by pointing out condescendingly that there are debts and debts, and that there was a difference between a prince and a coach-builder. He was having none of it. Grandfather had risen in revolt. No meant no! Grandmother did not know what to do.

'She was intimately acquainted with a most remarkable man. You've heard of the Count de Saint-Germain, the subject of so many weird and wonderful tales. You know he passed himself off as the Wandering Jew, the inventor of the elixir of life and

the philosopher's stone, and so forth. People used to ridicule him as a charlatan, and Casanova says in his memoirs\* that he was a spy; however that might be, Saint-Germain, for all his air of mystery, was outwardly most respectable, and a model of courtesy in society. Grandmother adores him to this day and gets cross if anyone speaks slightly of him. She knew that Saint-Germain had a large fortune at his disposal. She resolved to avail herself of his help and wrote him a note asking him to come and see her at once. The singular old man turned up straight away and found her in a dreadful state. She described her husband's barbarous behaviour in the blackest of colours, and concluded by saying that she was reposing all her hopes on his friendship and kindness. Saint-Germain pondered. "I can accommodate you as far as the sum of money goes," he said, "but I know you would not be at ease until you had repaid me, and I would not wish to encumber you with fresh worries. There is another way—you can win it back."

"But my dear Count," grandmother replied, "I'm telling you, we have no money at all."

"Money is not necessary in this case," said Saint-Germain, "be good enough to hear me out." It was at this point that he revealed to her a secret which any one of us would give a great deal to possess . . .

The young gamblers redoubled their attention. Tomsy lit his pipe and got it drawing before he resumed:

'That same evening, grandmother presented herself at Versailles, *au jeu de la Reine*.\* The Duke of Orleans was holding the bank; grandmother casually excused herself for not bringing what she owed, spinning some little story as cover, and began staking against him. She selected three cards, betting on them one after the other: all three won and grandmother recouped every bit of her losses.'

'Pure luck!'

'A tall story,' remarked Hermann.

'The cards might have been marked,' pursued a third.

'I don't think so,' Tomsy responded gravely.

'What do you mean?' said Narumov. 'You have a grandmother who can predict three cards in sequence, and you haven't learned the magic formula from her yet?'

'Not much chance of that!' Tomsy replied. 'She had four sons, including my father; all four were desperate gamblers and she hasn't told one of them her secret, though it would have been very much to their advantage, not to mention mine. But this is what my uncle, Count Ivan Ilych, told me, on his word of honour. As a young man, the late Chaplitsky, the one who died penniless after getting through millions, once lost—to Zorich, I think it was—around three hundred thousand. He was in despair. Grandmother always disapproved of youthful frolics, but took pity on Chaplitsky for some reason. She gave him three cards to bet on in succession, and made him give his word of honour never to play again. Chaplitsky went back to his conqueror; they sat down to play. Chaplitsky bet fifty thousand on the first card and won straight off; doubled the stakes, redoubled—and recouped his losses and a bit besides . . .

'Still, time for bed: it's quarter to six already.'

And indeed, day was already dawning. The young men drained their glasses and dispersed.

## II

'Il paraît que monsieur est décidément pour les suivantes.'  
'Que voulez-vous, madame? Elles sont plus fraîches.'

(Polite conversation)\*

The old Countess was sitting in her boudoir in front of the mirror. Three maids surrounded her. One was holding a jar of rouge, the second a box of pins, and the third a tall bonnet with flame-coloured ribbons. The Countess had not the least pretension to beauty, by now long-faded, but had retained all the habits of her youth; she clung rigidly to the fashions of the '70s and was as meticulously long over her toilette as she had been sixty years before. A young lady, her ward, sat by the window at her embroidery.

'Good morning, *grand'maman!*' said a young officer, coming into the room: '*Bonjour, Mademoiselle Lise. Grand'maman*, I have a favour to ask you.'

'What is that, *Paul?*'

'Allow me to introduce one of my friends and bring him to the ball on Friday.'

'Bring him straight to the ball, and you can introduce him to me there. Were you at N.'s yesterday, may I ask?'

'I certainly was! It was very gay; dancing till five. *Elets kaya* was so pretty!'

'Really, my dear boy! What do you see in her? Her grandmother, the Princess Darya Petrovna, was ten times the woman . . . By the way, I expect she's getting on now, Princess Darya Petrovna?'

'What do you mean, getting on?' Tomsy responded unthinkingly. 'She's been dead these seven years.'

The young lady raised her head and made a sign to him. He bit his lip as he remembered that the death of contemporaries was always kept from the old Countess. She, however, received the news with marked indifference.

'Dead!' she said. 'And I didn't even know! We were maids

of honour together, and when we were being presented, the Empress . . .'

And the Countess related the story to her grandson for the hundredth time.

'Well now, *Paul*,' she said presently, 'help me to get up. Lizanka, where is my snuff-box?'

And the Countess went behind the screens with her maids to finish off her toilette. Tomsy was left alone with the young lady.

'Who is it you want to introduce?' Lizaveta Ivanovna inquired softly.

'Narumov. Do you know him?'

'No. Is he a soldier or a civilian?'

'Soldier.'

'An engineer?'

'No, cavalry. Why should you think he was an engineer?'

The young lady laughed and said not a word in answer.

'*Paul!*' cried the Countess from behind the screens. 'Send me some new novel, would you, but please not one of the latest ones.'

'How do you mean, *grand'maman*?'

'I want the sort where the hero doesn't strangle either his father or mother, and there are no drowned bodies. I have a mortal dread of drowned bodies.'

'They don't write that kind nowadays. Unless you'd like some Russian ones.'

'Are there really such things? . . . Send them along, dear boy, by all means!'

'Do excuse me, *grand'maman*: I'm in a hurry . . . Goodbye, Lizaveta Ivanovna. Why on earth did you think Narumov was an engineer?'

And Tomsy left the boudoir.

Lizaveta Ivanovna was now on her own; she abandoned her work and began gazing out of the window. Presently, a young officer emerged from behind the corner-house on the other side of the street. A flush spread across her cheeks; she took up her work again and bent her head close to the design. At that moment the Countess entered, fully dressed.

'Order the carriage, Lizanka,' she said. 'We'll go for a drive.'

Liza rose from her embroidery and began putting her work away.

'What's the matter with you, my girl! Deaf are you?' shouted the Countess. 'Order the carriage this minute.'

'At once,' the young lady answered softly and ran out into the hall.

A servant entered and handed the Countess some books from Prince Pavel Alexandrovich.

'Good! Thank him for me,' said the Countess: 'Lizanka, Lizanka, where are you off to now for heaven's sake?'

'To get dressed.'

'Plenty of time for that, dear. Just stay here. Open the first book now and read aloud . . .'

The young lady took up the book and read several lines.

'Louder!' said the Countess. 'What's the matter with you, my girl! Lost your voice have you? . . . Wait a minute . . . move my footstool; no, nearer . . . well, go on then!'

Lizaveta Ivanovna read another two pages. The Countess yawned.

'Leave off that one,' she said. 'What rubbish! Send it back to Pavel and tell them to thank him . . . Where's that carriage?'

'The carriage is ready,' said Lizaveta Ivanovna, glancing out into the street.

'Why on earth aren't you dressed?' said the Countess. 'Always have to wait for you. It's intolerable, my girl!'

Liza ran off to her room. Within two minutes the Countess had begun to ring with all her might. The three maids ran in at one door and a valet at the other.

'Why is there no getting hold of you?' the Countess demanded. 'Tell Lizaveta Ivanovna I'm waiting.'

Lizaveta Ivanovna entered in her coat and bonnet.

'At last, my girl!' said the Countess. 'Such finery! What are you up to? . . . Who are you out to dazzle? . . . And what's it like outside. Windy, isn't it?'

'No indeed, your highness! Not a breath of wind!' responded the valet.

'You just say the first thing that comes into your head! Open the top pane. Just as I thought: windy! And freezing cold!'

Unharness the carriage. Lizanka, we're not going. You needn't have dolled yourself up.'

'And this is the life I lead!' thought Lizaveta Ivanovna.

Indeed, Lizaveta Ivanovna was a most forlorn creature. The bread of a stranger is bitter, says Dante, and painful the steps of a stranger's stair; and who should know the bitterness of dependency better than the poor ward of a society lady? The Countess, of course, was not malicious by nature, but she was wilful, like any lady spoilt by society; she was miserly and sunk in a cold selfishness, like all old people who have drunk their fill of love when young and are alienated from the present day. She involved herself in all the vanities of high society; she would haul herself along to dances and sit in the corner, heavily rouged and dressed in antique fashion, for all the world like some grotesque but obligatory ballroom ornament; on arrival, guests would approach, bowing low according to established ritual, then pay her no further attention. At home she used to receive the whole town, observing strict etiquette, though she recognized no one's face. Her numerous retainers, grown stout and grizzled in her hall and maid's quarters, did whatever they liked, competing with one another in robbing the dying old woman. Lizaveta Ivanovna was a domestic martyr. She poured out the tea and was berated for using too much sugar; she read novels aloud, and was to blame for all the author's failings; she accompanied the Countess on her outings, and was held responsible for the weather and the state of the roads. She had a fixed salary, but it was always in arrears; at the same time, she was expected to dress like other people, or rather like very few other people. In society, she played a most pitiable role. Everyone knew her, but no one noticed her; at balls, she would dance only when someone lacked a partner, and ladies would take her arm when they needed to go to the cloakroom to adjust their clothing. She had her pride and felt her position keenly; she was ever on the lookout, impatiently awaiting a deliverer. The young men, however, calculating in their fickle vanity, did not favour her with their attention, although Lizaveta Ivanovna was a hundred times nicer than the cold and haughty maidens on whom they danced attendance. Many a time she had quietly quitted the tedious splendours of the salon and gone off to weep in her own poor little

room, with its papered screen, chest of drawers, small mirror, and painted bedstead, and where a tallow candle burned dimly in its brass holder.

It came to pass—two days after the the evening described at the beginning of this tale, and a week before the scene at which we have just paused—it came to pass that Lizaveta Ivanovna, while seated below the window and busy with her embroidery, happened to glance outside and caught sight of a young engineer standing motionless, staring at her window. She lowered her head and resumed her work; five minutes later she glanced out again—the young officer was standing on the very same spot. Not being in the habit of flirting with passing officers, she stopped looking out and sewed away for two hours with head bent. Dinner was served. She rose and began tidying away her embroidery frame; chancing to look down into the street, she again caught sight of the officer. This struck her as rather odd. After dinner, she approached the window with a certain sense of unease, but the officer was no longer there—and she dismissed him from her mind . . .

Some two days later, as she was coming out with the Countess to get into the carriage, she saw him again. He was standing close by the entrance, his face hidden by a beaver collar; his dark eyes glittered beneath his cap. Lizaveta felt alarmed without knowing why, and sensed an unaccountable flutter as she got into the carriage.

After returning home, she ran over to the window. The officer was positioned as before, his eyes fastened upon her; she turned away in an agony of curiosity, stirred by an emotion entirely new to her.

From that time forth, not a day passed without the young man appearing beneath the windows of the house at a fixed hour. An undefined relationship grew up between them. Seated in her usual work-place, she would sense his approach and lift her head to look at him, a little longer each day. The young man seemed grateful to her for this: she saw with the keen eye of youth how his pale cheeks would flush swiftly whenever their glances met. After a week, she gave him a smile . . .

When Tomsky had asked permission to introduce his friend to the Countess the poor girl's heart had gone pit-a-pat. When

she discovered, however, that Narumov was in the Horse Guards and not an engineer, she regretted that by an indiscreet enquiry she had betrayed her secret to the light-minded Tomsky.

Hermann was the son of a Russianized German, who had left him a small sum of money. Firmly convinced of the necessity of consolidating his independence, Hermann had not laid a finger even on the interest, preferring to live solely on his pay, and denying himself the smallest extravagance. As he was reserved and keenly ambitious, however, his comrades rarely had an opportunity to make fun of his excessive thrift. He was a man of strong emotions and possessed an ardent imagination, but his steadiness preserved him from the usual errors of youth. For example, though he had the soul of a gambler, he never picked up a card, calculating that his finances did not permit him (as he used to put it) 'to sacrifice the necessary in the hope of acquiring the superfluous'—and yet he would sit up all night at the card tables, trembling feverishly, as he followed the shifting fortunes of the play.

The story of the three cards played on his imagination and kept running through his head all night. 'What if,' he mused next evening, as he wandered about Petersburg, 'what if the old Countess were to reveal her secret to me? Or named the three winning cards to me? Why shouldn't I try my luck? . . . Get myself presented to her, work my way into her affections; become her lover even; but all that needs time and she's eighty-seven years old: she could die within the week, in two days! . . . And what about the story itself? . . . Is it credible? . . . No! Calculation, moderation, and hard work: those are my three winning cards, they are what will increase my capital three times over, seven times, and provide me with peace of mind and independence!' Reasoning in this fashion, he found himself on one of the main thoroughfares of Petersburg, in front of a house from a bygone architectural era. The street was thronged with carriages, rolling up in succession to the brightly lit entrance. Now the slender ankle of a young beauty would emerge from these carriages, now a clinking jack-boot, or a striped stocking and a diplomatic shoe. Fur coats and capes went flickering past a stately hall porter. Hermann came to a stop.

'Whose house is this?' he asked the watchman.

'Countess \*\*\*,' responded the watchman.

Hermann quivered. The amazing story once more rose in his imagination. He began pacing about near the house, thinking of its mistress and her miraculous ability. He came back late to his humble quarters; for long he was unable to drop off, and when sleep did overwhelm him, he dreamed of cards, a green table, heaps of banknotes, and piles of gold coins. He bet on card after card, resolutely doubling his stakes, and kept winning relentlessly, raking the gold towards him and pocketing the banknotes. Waking late, he sighed at losing his fabulous wealth, and set off once more to roam the streets of the city and once more found himself before the house of Countess \*\*\*. Some unknown force, it seemed, was drawing him towards it. He stopped and began gazing at the windows. In one, he glimpsed a head of dark hair, bent forward over a book, no doubt, or work of some sort. The head lifted and Hermann caught a glimpse of a fresh young face and dark eyes. That moment decided his fate.



## III

Vous m'écrivez, mon ange, des lettres de quatre pages plus vite que je ne puis les lire.

(A Correspondence)\*

No sooner had Lizaveta Ivanovna managed to take off her hat and coat than the Countess was sending for her and ordering the carriage again. They went out to take their seats. As the footmen were lifting up the old woman and passing her through the doors, Lizaveta Ivanovna caught sight of her engineer right by the wheel; he seized her arm and, before she could recover from her fright, he was gone; a note had been left in her hand. She hid it inside her glove and saw and heard nothing for the entire journey. The Countess was in the habit of constantly asking questions when they were in the carriage: who was that person we passed? What's the name of this bridge? What does that sign say? This time Lizaveta Ivanovna's responses were random and irrelevant, incurring the wrath of the Countess.

'What's the matter with you, my girl! Are you in a daze or something? Can't you hear what I'm saying, or don't you understand me? . . . Thank heaven I've still got my wits and don't mumble my words!'

Lizaveta Ivanovna ignored her. When they got back home she ran to her room and took the letter from her glove: it was unsealed. Lizaveta Ivanovna read it through. The letter contained a confession of love; it was tender, respectful, and translated word for word from a German novel. Lizaveta Ivanovna did not know German, however, and was very pleased with it.

Nevertheless, the letter troubled her greatly. It was the first time she had entered into an intimate, clandestine relationship with a young man. His boldness terrified her. She reproached herself with her indiscreet behaviour and did not know what to do: should she stop sitting by the window, and dampen the young officer's inclination to pursue matters further by ignoring him? Send his letter back? Answer coldly and firmly? She had

no one to discuss things with: she had neither girl-friend nor mentor. Lizaveta Ivanovna decided to reply.

She sat down at her little writing-table, took up pen and paper—and fell to pondering. She started on her letter several times, then tore it up: the phrases seemed too indulgent, or too heartless. Eventually, she managed to write a few lines that left her satisfied. 'I am sure', she wrote, 'that you have honourable intentions, and that you would not wish to insult me by an ill-considered action, but our acquaintance ought not to begin in this fashion. I am returning your letter and hope that I shall not have cause in the future to complain of an unmerited lack of respect.'

Next day, seeing Hermann walking below, Lizaveta Ivanovna got up from her embroidery-frame, went out into the hall, opened the fanlight, and threw the letter outside, relying on the adroitness of the young officer. Hermann ran up, retrieved the note, and went off into a confectionary shop. Tearing off the seal, he found his letter and Lizaveta Ivanovna's reply. It was no more than he expected, and he returned home much preoccupied with his scheming.

Three days later a pert young miss brought Lizaveta Ivanovna a note from the dress-shop. She opened it with apprehension, anticipating some request for payment, then all at once recognized Hermann's writing.

'You've made a mistake, dear', said she. 'This note is not for me.'

'No, it is really!' replied the audacious girl, not bothering to conceal a sly smile. 'Do read it!'

Lizaveta Ivanovna ran her eye over it. Hermann was asking for a rendezvous.

'Impossible,' said Lizaveta Ivanovna, alarmed both at the speed of the request and its method of delivery. 'Really, this is not for me.'

And tore the letter into small pieces.

'If the letter wasn't to you, why did you tear it up?' said the young miss. 'I would have given it back to the person who sent it.'

'If you please, miss,' said Lizaveta Ivanovna, flaring up at the remark, 'don't bring me notes in future. And tell the person who sent you that he should be ashamed . . .'

agility

But Hermann persisted. Every day Lizaveta Ivanovna received letters from him by one means or another. By now they were no longer translated from the German. Hermann had written them, inspired by his passion, and spoke in his own character: they expressed both the inexorable nature of his desires and the turmoil of his unfettered imagination. Lizaveta Ivanovna thought no more of sending them back: she revelled in them, began to reply to them, and her notes became longer and more affectionate by the day. At length, she threw the following letter through the window:

'Tonight there is a ball at the X embassy. The Countess will be there. We will stay until about two. That will be your opportunity to see me alone. As soon as the Countess goes off, the servants will probably go their different ways; a hall porter will remain in the lobby, but he usually goes off to his cubicle. Come at half-past eleven. Walk straight up the stairs. If you find anyone in the lobby, just ask if the Countess is at home. They'll say no—and there's nothing for it, you'll have to go back. But you probably won't encounter anyone. The maids stay in their room, all together. From the lobby, walk left, then straight ahead till you reach the Countess's bedroom. In the bedroom, behind the screen, you will see two small doors: the one on the right is the study, where the Countess never goes, the left one leads into a corridor and the narrow spiral staircase there leads up to my room.'

Hermann was quivering like a tiger as he awaited the appointed time. At ten o'clock he was already standing before the Countess's house. The weather was dreadful: the wind howled and flakes of wet snow were falling; the street-lights glowed dim; the roads were deserted. Occasionally a cabbie ambled past with his scrawny nag, on the look-out for a late fare. Hermann stood there, clad only in a frock-coat, oblivious to both wind and snow. At long last the Countess's carriage drew up. Hermann watched as the hunched old woman, wrapped in sables, was carried out by flunkies gripping either arm. Behind flitted her ward in a chilly cloak, her head adorned with fresh flowers. The coach doors slammed, and the carriage moved off ponderously through the damp snow. The hall porter closed the door. The windows darkened. Hermann began to walk nearer the deserted

house; he went up to the street-lamp and glanced at his watch: it was twenty-past eleven. He remained under the lamp, staring at the hour hand, and waited out the remaining minutes. At exactly half-past eleven Hermann stepped on to the Countess's porch and went up into the brightly lit vestibule. The hall porter was not there. Hermann ran up the stairs, opened the door into the anteroom, and saw a servant asleep beneath a lamp, in a soiled antique armchair. With light, firm tread, Hermann went by him. The hall and drawing-room were dark but for the feeble lamplight from the anteroom. Hermann entered the bedroom. A golden icon-lamp was burning before a case of antique images. Faded brocade armchairs and sofas with worn gilding and down-filled cushions stood in sad symmetry around the Chinese-papered walls, on which hung two portraits painted in Paris by Madame Lebrun.\* One of them depicted a man of about forty, stout and florid, wearing a light-green uniform and star; the other was a young beauty with an aquiline nose, hair combed back from the temples, and a rose in her powdered locks. Every corner was crammed with porcelain shepherdesses, table-clocks by the celebrated Leroy, little boxes, bandalores, fans, and sundry ladies' playthings invented, along with the Montgolfier balloon and Mesmer's magnetism,\* at the end of the last century. Hermann went behind the screen. A small iron bed stood here; on the right was the door to the study; on the left, the second door, leading into the passage. Hermann opened it and saw the narrow, spiral staircase which led to the bedroom of the poor ward . . . But he turned back and went into the dark study.

Time passed slowly. All was quiet. The clock in the drawing-room struck twelve; through all the rooms, one after another, the clocks chimed twelve, then all fell silent again. Hermann stood, leaning against the cold stove. He felt calm; his heart beat steadily, like that of a man who had nerved himself to execute some hazardous but necessary enterprise. The clocks struck one, then two—and then he heard the distant rumble of a carriage. An involuntary excitement seized him. The carriage drew up to the house and halted. He heard the sound of a step being lowered. The house began to stir. People ran about, voices were raised, and lights came on. Three aged maids ran into the

bedroom, and the Countess, utterly exhausted, entered and collapsed into a Voltaire armchair. Hermann peered through a crack in the door. Lizaveta Ivanovna came past him. Hermann heard her quick steps on the staircase. His heart responded with something like a pang of conscience, then subsided again. He froze.

The Countess began to undress in front of the mirror. Her rose-decked cap was unpinned; her powdered wig was removed from her grizzled, close-cropped head; pins rained down about her. The yellow dress with silver stitching fell to her swollen feet. Hermann witnessed the revolting secrets of her toilette. At length, the Countess was left in her bed-jacket and nightcap: in this garb, more suited to her age, she seemed less dreadful and hideous.

Like all old people, the Countess suffered from insomnia. After undressing, she sat down by the window in her Voltaire armchair and dismissed her maids. The candles were removed; once more the room was lit only by the icon-lamp. The Countess was a study in yellow, mumbling her drooping lips and rocking from side to side. Her dull eyes registered a complete absence of thought. Looking at her, one might have imagined that the fearful old woman's rocking was not something willed, but prompted by some concealed galvanic current.

All at once that dead face changed unutterably. The lips ceased moving, the eyes became animated: before the Countess stood a strange man.

'Don't be afraid, for heaven's sake, don't be afraid!' he said in a low, distinct voice. 'I have no intention of doing you harm; I have come to beg a certain favour of you.'

The old woman looked silently at him, seeming not to have heard. Hermann assumed she was deaf and, bending right down to her ear, repeated his words. The old woman remained mute.

'You can bring about my life's happiness,' Hermann went on, 'without it costing you anything: I know that you can predict three cards in a row...'

Hermann stopped. The Countess, it seemed, had realized what he was asking. She appeared to be searching for a reply.

'That was a joke,' she finally brought out: 'I swear to you it was a joke!'

'That was no joking matter,' Hermann protested angrily. 'Remember Chaplitsky, whom you helped to recoup his losses?'

The Countess was evidently disconcerted. Her features registered considerable inward tumult; but she presently lapsed into her former apathy.

'Can you', Hermann pursued, 'name the three infallible cards for me?'

The Countess said nothing. Hermann continued:

'Who are you keeping your secret for? Your grandsons? They are rich as it is; they don't even know the value of money. Your cards won't help a prodigal. A man who can't hold on to his patrimony will end up a pauper whatever happens, no matter what demonic efforts he puts in. I am no spendthrift; I know the value of money. Your three cards won't be wasted on me. Well? ...'

He stopped and trembled in anticipation of her reply. She said nothing. Hermann knelt before her.

'If your heart has ever known the emotion of love, if you can remember its raptures, if you smiled just once at the cry of a new-born son, if anything human ever throbbed within your breast, I beseech you by the feelings of wife, lover, mother, everything that is sacred in life, do not refuse what I ask! Reveal your secret to me! What do you want with it? ... Perhaps it is linked to some dreadful sin, the loss of eternal bliss, a pact with the devil ... Think now, you are old; you have little time to live. I am willing to take your sin on my soul. Just reveal your secret to me. Think, a man's happiness is in your hands; that not only I, but my children, grandsons, and their sons will bless and venerate your memory ...'

The old woman said not a word in reply.

Hermann rose.

'Old witch!' he said gritting his teeth. 'Then I'll make you answer ...'

Whereupon he drew a pistol from his pocket. At the sight of it the Countess for a second time betrayed signs of powerful emotion. She began shaking her head and raised her hand, as if shielding herself from the shot ... then she rolled onto her back ... and remained motionless.

'Stop being childish,' said Hermann, taking her hand. 'I'm

asking you for the last time: do you want to name me your three cards? Yes, or no?’

The Countess did not answer. Hermann saw that she had died.

## IV

7 Mai 18\*\*

Homme sans mœurs et sans religion!

(A correspondence)\*

Lizaveta Ivanovna sat in her room, still in her ballroom finery, absorbed in deep reflection. On returning home, she had hastily dismissed the sleepy maid who had reluctantly offered her services, saying that she would undress herself; she went trembling to her room, hoping to find Hermann there and wishing not to. A glance assured her of his absence and she blessed providence for the obstacle which had thwarted their rendezvous. She sat down without undressing and began reviewing all the circumstances which had led her so far in so short a time. It had not been three weeks since she had first seen the young man through the window and she was already corresponding with him—and he had succeeded in obtaining a nocturnal assignation with her! She knew his name only because some of his letters had been signed; she had never spoken to him, never heard his voice, never heard of him indeed . . . until that evening. How strange! That very evening, at the ball, Tomsy had been annoyed at young Princess Polina's uncharacteristic flirting with another, and so put on a show of indifference, hoping to exact revenge: he had invited Lizaveta Ivanovna and danced an endless mazurka with her. He continually teased her about her penchant for engineer officers, assuring her that he knew much more than she might suppose, and some of his witticisms were so close to the mark that Lizaveta Ivanovna thought several times that he was privy to her secret.

‘Who told you all this?’ she asked, laughing.

‘The friend of a person known to you,’ replied Tomsy. ‘A really capital fellow!’

‘And just who is this capital fellow?’

‘His name is Hermann.’

Lizaveta Ivanovna made no reply, but her hands and feet turned to ice.

'This Hermann', Tomsy went on, 'is a genuinely romantic personality. He has the profile of Napoleon and the soul of Mephistopheles. I think he has at least three crimes on his conscience. How pale you've turned! . . .'

'I've got a headache . . . What on earth did he say to you, this Hermann . . . or whatever his name is?'

'Hermann is not at all happy with his friend: he says that in his shoes he would have acted quite otherwise . . . I really do think Hermann has his eye on you himself; at any rate, he can't abide his friend's amorous sighs.'

'But where can he have seen me?'

'In church, perhaps, or out walking! . . . Lord alone knows! Perhaps in your room while you were asleep: I wouldn't put it past him . . .'

Three ladies who came up to ask: '*oubli ou regret?*'\* interrupted a conversation, which had become agonizingly intriguing for Lizaveta Ivanovna.

The lady Tomsy chose was the very same Princess Polina. She had time to explain her conduct as they danced an extra circuit, making an extra spin in front of her chair. Returning to his place, Tomsy no longer had thoughts of Hermann or Lizaveta Ivanovna. The latter was anxious to resume the disrupted conversation, but the mazurka was over and presently the old Countess took her departure.

Tomsy's words had been nothing more than ballroom banter, but they sank deep into the soul of the young dreamer. The portrait sketched by Tomsy corresponded to the image she herself had formed, and, thanks to the latest novels, this now-hackneyed figure both dismayed and captivated her imagination. She sat, bare arms crossed, as her head, still decked out with flowers, drooped towards her uncovered breast . . . Suddenly the door opened and Hermann came in. She began to tremble . . .

'Where on earth have you been?' she asked in a frightened whisper.

'In the bedroom, with the old Countess,' replied Hermann: 'I've just come from there. The Countess is dead.'

'Heavens! . . . What did you say? . . .'

'And, apparently,' Hermann went on, 'I am the cause of her death.'

Lizaveta Ivanovna shot a glance at him, and Tomsy's words resounded in her heart: *he has at least three crimes on his conscience!* Hermann sat down on the window-sill near her and told her everything.

Lizaveta Ivanovna heard him out with horror. So, those passionate letters, the ardent demands, the audacious, persistent pursuit—all that had not been love! Money! That was what his soul craved! It was not she who could assuage his desires and render him happy! The poor ward had been nothing more than an unwitting accomplice to a bandit, the murderer of her old benefactress . . . She began crying bitterly in an agony of belated remorse. Hermann gazed at her in silence: his heart was also tormented, but neither the tears of the poor girl nor the astonishing charm of her grief touched his grim soul. He did not feel any gnawings of conscience at the thought of the old woman's death. One thing dismayed him: the irretrievable loss of the secret from which he had anticipated enrichment.

'You are a monster!' said Lizaveta Ivanovna at last.

'I did not intend her death,' replied Hermann. 'My pistol is not loaded.'

They fell silent.

Morning was approaching. Lizaveta Ivanovna snuffed out the guttering candle. A pale light suffused her room. She wiped her tearful eyes and raised them to Hermann: he was sitting on the sill, arms folded, grimly frowning. In this pose, he bore an amazing resemblance to a portrait of Napoleon. The likeness struck even Lizaveta Ivanovna.

'How are you going to leave the house?' she said at length. 'I was going to take you down the secret staircase, but that would mean going past the bedroom and I'm frightened.'

'Tell me how to find this hidden staircase and I'll go myself.'

Lizaveta Ivanovna got up and retrieved a key from the chest of drawers, handed it to Hermann, and gave him detailed instructions. Hermann pressed her cold, unresponsive hand, kissed her bowed head, and left.

He went down the spiral staircase and again entered the Countess's bedroom. The dead old woman sat there stonily; her face bore an expression of profound serenity. Hermann halted before her, staring long at her, as if wishing to assure himself of the

awful truth. Finally he went into the study, feeling for a door behind the wall-hanging, and began to descend a dark staircase, a prey to strange emotions. 'Perhaps up this very staircase,' he thought, 'sixty years or so ago, into that same bedroom, at the same hour, in his embroidered coat, coiffeured à l'oiseau royale\* and clutching his tricorne hat to his heart, there stole some fortunate young man, now long mouldering in the grave; and to-night the heart of his aged mistress has ceased to beat . . .'

At the bottom of the staircase Hermann discovered a door, opened it with the same key, and found himself in a corridor leading him out into the street.

## V

That night the late Baroness von V\*\*\* appeared to me. She was all in white and said to me: 'Good evening, Mister Councillor!'

(Swedenborg)\*

Three days after the fateful night, at nine in the morning, Hermann set out for the monastery where the funeral service for the late Countess was to be held. He felt no remorse, yet was unable to stifle the voice of conscience altogether when it kept telling him: 'You are the murderer of the old woman!' Though he possessed little genuine faith, he was a prey to superstition. He believed that the dead Countess might exercise a pernicious influence on his life, and had nerved himself to attend her funeral and beg her forgiveness.

The church was full. Hermann had to force his way through the crowds of people. The coffin stood on an opulent catafalque under a velvet canopy. The deceased lay in it, arms crossed on her breast, wearing a lace cap and a white satin dress. Her servants stood around and about, holding candles and wearing black caftans with armorial bearings on their shoulders; the relations wore deep mourning—her children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren. No one wept: tears would have been *une affectation*. The Countess had been so old that her death could not have been a shock to anyone, and her relatives had long considered her as having outlived her time. A young bishop spoke the funeral oration. In simple and moving phrases he pictured the peaceful passing of a righteous woman, for whom the long years had been a quiet, touching preparation for a Christian end. 'The angel of death found her,' said the orator, 'vigilant in pious thoughts and in expectation of the midnight bridegroom.\*' The service concluded with mournful formality. The relatives were the first to go up and take leave of the body. Then came the turn of the innumerable guests who had come to pay their respects to one who had for so long been a participant in their frivolous amusements. After them came all the domestics. Finally an old

housekeeper, the same age as the deceased, approached, supported by two young girls. She was unable to bow to the ground, and she was the only one to shed a few tears as she kissed the cold hand of her mistress. After that, Hermann resolved to approach the coffin. He bowed to the ground and lay for several moments on the cold floor, strewn with fir-twigs. At length he rose, pale as the corpse itself, ascended the steps of the catafalque, and bent down . . . At that moment it seemed to him that the deceased gave him a mocking glance and winked an eye. Hermann, in hastily recoiling, missed his footing and crashed face upwards to the ground. He was helped to his feet. At that same moment Lizaveta Ivanovna was carried out on to the porch in a faint. This episode disturbed the solemnity of the sombre ritual for some minutes. A subdued murmuring started up among the congregation, and a gaunt chamberlain, a close relative of the deceased, whispered in the ear of an Englishman standing close by that the young officer was her illegitimate son, to which the Englishman responded stiffly: 'Oh?'

All that day Hermann was deeply distraught. He had dined at an out-of-the-way inn and uncharacteristically drunk a great deal in the hope of stilling his inner turmoil. The wine, however, stimulated his imagination even more. On getting back home, he hurled himself fully dressed on to the bed and fell soundly asleep.

It was night when he awoke: moonlight flooded his room. He glanced at his watch; it was quarter to three. Sleep having deserted him, he sat on the bed thinking over the old Countess's funeral.

Just then, someone outside glanced at him through the window, and went away at once. Hermann paid no attention. A moment later he heard the door of the outer room being opened. Hermann thought it must be his orderly, drunk as was his habit, returning from a nocturnal outing. But then he heard an unfamiliar step: someone was quietly scuffling their shoes as they walked. The door opened: a woman in a white dress came in. Hermann took her for his old nurse and wondered what could have brought her here at this hour. But the white woman glided right up to him—and Hermann recognized the Countess!

'I have come to you against my will', she said in a steady

voice. 'But I am commanded to gratify your request. The three, the seven, and the ace will win for you in sequence, but with this condition, that you bet on no more than one card each day, and that you gamble no more for the rest of your life. I forgive you my death, on condition that you marry my ward, Lizaveta Ivanovna . . .'

With this, she quietly turned, proceeded to the door, and, with a scuffle of shoes, disappeared from view. Hermann heard the door slam out in the passage and glimpsed someone looking in at him again through the window.

Hermann could not recover himself for a long time. He went out into the other room. His orderly was asleep on the floor; Hermann forced him awake. The orderly was drunk, as usual; there was no getting anything sensible out of him. The door in the passage was locked. Hermann returned to his room, lit a candle, and wrote down what he had seen.

## VI

'Attendez!'

'How dare you say "attendez" to me?'

'Your excellency, I said "attendez", sir!'

Two fixed ideas cannot coexist in the moral sphere, just as two bodies cannot occupy the same space in the physical world. The three, the seven, and the ace soon blotted out the image of the dead Countess from Hermann's imagination. Three, seven, ace never quitted his head, and constantly moved on his lips. If he caught sight of a young girl, he would say: 'Isn't she slender, just like a three of hearts.' If he was asked the time, he would reply: 'five minutes to the seven.' Any pot-bellied gentleman reminded him of an ace. The three, seven, and ace haunted him in dreams, assuming every sort of guise; the three blossomed before him in the shape of a sumptuous grandiflora, the seven took the form of a Gothic gateway, the ace became a giant spider. All his thoughts merged into one—to make use of the secret which had cost him so dear. He began thinking of retirement and travel. In the public casinos of Paris he intended to wrest the treasure from enchanted fate. Chance relieved him of the trouble.

In Moscow, a society of rich gamblers had assembled under the presidency of the famed Chekalinsky, who had spent a lifetime at the card-table and had made millions in his time, winning promissory notes and paying his losses in hard cash. This long experience had earned him the trust of his fellows, and his open house, celebrated chef, his courtesy and affability had won him the respect of the public at large. He had now arrived in Petersburg, and the young men flocked to him, forsaking the ballroom for the card-table, preferring the lure of faro to the fascinations of gallantry. Narumov brought Hermann to see him.

They passed through a series of splendid rooms, crowded with people and well supplied with attentive waiters. A number of generals and privy councillors were playing whist; the young men sat lounging on brocade sofas, eating ice-cream and smoking

pipes. In the drawing-room, some twenty gamblers jostled round a long table, where sat the host, who was holding the bank. He was a most respectable-looking man of about sixty; he had a silvery-grey head of hair; his plump, fresh face was a picture of good nature; his eyes shone, animated by a perpetual smile. Narumov introduced Hermann to him. Chekalinsky cordially shook his hand, begged him to make himself at home, and carried on dealing.

Play had been going on a good while and more than thirty cards lay on the table. Chekalinsky would pause after every round to give the players time to make their arrangements, meanwhile noting down their losses, listening politely to their requests, and even more politely straightening the odd corner bent by a distracted hand. At length the round concluded. Chekalinsky shuffled the cards and prepared to deal another.

'Permit me to place a stake,' said Hermann, stretching out an arm from behind a stout gentleman gamester.

Chekalinsky smiled and silently bowed, indicating an accommodating assent. Narumov laughingly congratulated Hermann on breaking his long-maintained abstention and wished him beginner's luck.

'I'm on,' said Hermann, chalking up his large stake above the card.

'How much, sir?' asked the banker, straining his eyes. 'Do excuse me, sir, I can't make it out.'

'Forty-seven thousand,' replied Hermann.

At these words, every head turned instantly and all eyes were fixed on Hermann. 'He's out of his mind!' thought Narumov.

'Permit me to point out', said Chekalinsky with his invariable smile, 'that you are playing for high stakes: no one here has ever staked more than two hundred and seventy-five on a single card.'

'What of it?' countered Hermann. 'Can you beat my card or not?'

Chekalinsky bowed, his air of humble compliance unchanged.

'I merely wished to bring to your attention', he said, 'that, in view of the trust reposed in me by my fellows, I cannot deal otherwise than for ready cash. For my own part, of course, I am confident that your word suffices, but for the conduct of the



game and the accounts, I must ask you to place your money on the card.'

Hermann extracted a banknote from his pocket and handed it to Chekalinsky who, after a swift glance, placed it on Hermann's card.

He began to deal. On the right a nine turned up, on the left a three.

'The three wins!' said Hermann, showing his card.

A whispering arose among the punters. Chekalinsky frowned; his smile, however, instantly returned to his face.

'Would you like your money now?' he asked Hermann.

'By all means.'

Chekalinsky took out a number of banknotes and settled on the spot. Hermann took his money and left the table. Narumov was utterly shaken. Hermann drank a glass of lemonade and set off homewards.

On the following evening he again appeared at Chekalinsky's. The host was dealing. Hermann approached the table; the gamblers at once made way for him. Chekalinsky bowed to him courteously.

Hermann waited for the next round, and placed his card with his forty-seven thousand and the previous day's winnings upon it.

Chekalinsky began dealing. A jack fell to the right, a seven to the left.

Hermann uncovered his seven.

Everyone gasped. Chekalinsky was visibly disconcerted. He counted out ninety-four thousand and passed it to Hermann, who accepted it phlegmatically and departed at once.

The next evening Hermann was once more at the table. Everyone was expecting him; the generals and the privy councillors abandoned their whist to watch this extraordinary play. The young officers leapt from their sofas and all the waiters gathered in the drawing-room. Everyone surrounded Hermann. The other punters placed no bets as they waited impatiently for what would befall. Hermann stood by the table, ready to gamble against Chekalinsky, who was pale but still smiling. Each broke the seal on a pack of cards. Chekalinsky shuffled. Hermann drew and placed his card, covering it with a heap of banknotes. It was like a duel. A profound silence reigned.

Chekalinsky's hands shook as he started to deal. On the right lay a queen, on the left an ace.

'My ace wins,' said Hermann, disclosing his card.

'Your queen loses,' said Chekalinsky gently.

Hermann gave a start: instead of an ace, the queen of spades was indeed lying there. He could not believe his eyes, unable to comprehend how he could have drawn the wrong card.

Just then it seemed to him that the queen of spades winked at him and grinned. The extraordinary likeness stunned him . . .

'The old woman!' he cried out in horror.

Chekalinsky drew the lost banknotes towards him as Hermann stood there motionless. When he moved away from the table, a hubbub commenced. 'Magnificent play', the gamblers were saying. Chekalinsky shuffled the cards again; the game resumed its course.

## CONCLUSION

Hermann went out of his mind. He is in Room 17 at the Obukhov Hospital,\* unresponsive to any questioning, merely muttering with extraordinary rapidity: 'The three, the seven and the ace! The three, the seven and the queen! . . .'

Lizaveta Ivanovna married a very pleasant young man; he is in the service somewhere and is possessed of a decent fortune: he is the son of the old Countess's former steward. Lizaveta Ivanovna is bringing up a poor relation.

Tomsky has been promoted to captain and is going to marry Princess Polina.