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THE BRONZE HORSEMAN

A Petersburg Tale, 1833

FOREWORD

The occurrence related in this tale is based on fact. The details of the flood (1) are taken from the journals of the day. The curious may consult the account composed by V. N. Berch (2).

INTRODUCTION

There, by the billows desolate,
He (3) stood, with mighty thoughts elate,
And gazed; but in the distance only
A sorry skiff on the broad spate
Of Neva drifted seaward, lonely.
The moss-grown miry banks with rare
Hovels were dotted here and there
Where wretched Finns for shelter crowded;
The murmuring woodlands had no share
Of sunshine, all in mist beshrouded.

And thus He mused: "From here, indeed
Shall we strike terror in the Swede;
And here a city (4) by our labor
Founded, shall gall our haughty neighbor;
'Here cut'--so Nature gives command--
'Your window through on Europe (5); stand
Firm-footed by the sea, unchanging!
Ay, ships of every flag shall come
By waters they had never swum,
And we shall revel, freely ranging."

A century--and that city young,
Gem of the Northern world, amazing,

From gloomy wood and swamp upsprung,
Had risen, in pride and splendor blazing.
Where once, by that low-lying shore,
In waters never known before
The Finnish fisherman, sole creature,
And left forlorn by stepdame Nature,

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Cast ragged nets--today, along
Those shores, astir with life and motion,
Vast shapely palaces in throng
And towers are seen: from every ocean,
From the world's end, the ships come fast,
To reach the loaded quays at last.
The Neva now is clad in granite
With many a bridge to overspan it;
The islands lie beneath a screen
Of gardens deep in dusky green.
To that young capital is drooping
The crest of Moscow on the ground,
A dowager in purple, stooping
Before an empress newly crowned.

I love thee, city of Peter's making (6);
I love thy harmonies austere,
And Neva's sovran waters breaking
Along her banks of granite sheer;
Thy traceried iron gates; thy sparkling,
Yet mouless, meditative gloom
And thy transparent twilight darkling;
And when I write within my room
Or lampless, read--then, sunk in slumber,
The empty thoroughfares, past number,
Are piled, stand clear upon the night;
The Admiralty spire (7) is bright;
Nor may the darkness mount, to smother
The golden cloudland of the light,

For soon one dawn succeeds another
With barely half-an-hour of night.
I love thy ruthless winter, lowering
With bitter frost and windless air;
The sledges along Neva scouring;
Girls' cheeks--no rose so bright and fair!
The flash and noise of balls, the chatter;
The bachelor's hour of feasting, too;
The cups that foam and hiss and spatter,
The punch that in the bowl burns blue.
I love the warlike animation
On playing-fields of Mars (8); to see
The troops of foot and horse in station,
And their superb monotony;
Their ordered, undulating muster;

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Flags, tattered on the glorious day;
Those brazen helmets in their luster
Shot through and riddled in the fray.
I love thee, city of soldiers, blowing
Smoke from thy forts; thy booming gun;
-- Northern empress is bestowing
Upon the royal house a son!
Or when, another battle won,
Proud Russia holds her celebration;
Or when the Neva breaking free
Her dark-blue ice bears out to sea
And scents the spring, in exultation.

Now, city of Peter, stand thou fast,
Foursquare, like Russia; vaunt thy splendor!
The very element shall surrender
And make her peace with thee at last.
Their ancient bondage and their rancors
The Finnish waves shall bury deep
Nor vex with idle spite that cankers
Our Peter's everlasting sleep!

There was a dreadful time, we keep
Still freshly on our memories painted;
And you, my friends, shall be acquainted
By me, with all that history:
A grievous record it will be.

PART I

O'er darkened Petrograd there rolled
November's breath of autumn cold (9);
And Neva with her boisterous billow
Splashed on her shapely bounding-wall
And tossed in restless rise and fall
Like a sick man upon his pillow.
'Twas late, and dark had fallen; the rain
Beat fiercely on the windowpane;
A wind that howled and wailed was blowing.

'Twas then that young Yevgeny came
Home from a party--I am going
To call our hero by that name,
For it sounds pleasing, and moreover
My pen once liked it--why discover
The needless surname?--True, it may

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Have been illustrious in past ages,
--Rung, through tradition, in the pages
Of Karamzin (10); and yet, today
That name is never recollected,
By Rumor and the World rejected.
Our hero--somewhere--served the State;
He shunned the presence of the great;
Lived in Kolomna (11); for the fate
Cared not of forbears dead and rotten,
Or antique matters long forgotten.
So, home Yevgeny came, and tossed
His cloak aside; undressed; and sinking
Sleepless upon his bed, was lost

In sundry meditations--thinking
Of what?--How poor he was; how pain
And toil might some day hope to gain
An honored, free, assured position;
How God, it might be, in addition
Would grant him better brains and pay.
Such idle folk there were, and they,
Lucky and lazy, not too brightly
Gifted, lived easily and lightly;
And he--was only in his second
Year at the desk. He further reckoned
That still the ugly weather held;
That still the river swelled and swelled;
That almost now from Neva's eddy
The bridges had been moved already;
That from Parasha he must be
Parted for some two days, or three.
And all that night, he lay, so dreaming,
And wishing sadly that the gale
Would bate its melancholy screaming
And that the rain would not assail
The glass so fiercely.... But sleep closes
His eyes at last, and he reposes.
But see, the mists of that rough night
Thin out, and the pale day grows bright;
That dreadful day!--For Neva, leaping
Seaward all night against the blast
Was beaten in the strife at last,
Against the frantic tempest sweeping;
And on her banks at break of day

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The people swarmed and crowded, curious,
And reveled in the towering spray
That spattered where the waves were furious.
But the wind driving from the bay
Dammed Neva back, and she receding
Came up, in wrath and riot speeding;

And soon the islands flooded lay.
Madder the weather grew, and ever
Higher upswelled the roaring river
And bubbled like a kettle, and whirled
And like a maddened beast was hurled
Swift on the city. All things routed
Fled from its path, and all about it
A sudden space was cleared; the flow
Dashed in the cellars down below;
Canals up to their gratings spouted.
Behold Petropol floating lie
Like Triton in the deep, waist-high!

A siege! the wicked waves, attacking
Climb thief-like through the windows; backing,
The boats stern-foremost smite the glass;
Trays with their soaking wrappage pass;
And timbers, roots, and huts all shattered,
The wares of thrifty traders scattered,
And the pale beggar's chattels small,
Bridges swept off beneath the squall,
Coffins from sodden graveyards--all
Swim in the streets!
And contemplating
God's wrath, the folk their doom are waiting.
All will be lost; ah, where shall they
Find food and shelter for today?

The glorious Emperor, now departed [\(12\)](#),
In that grim year was sovereign
Of Russia still. He came, sick-hearted,
Out on his balcony, and in pain
He said: "No czar, 'tis sure, is master
Over God's elements!" In thought
He sat, and gazed on the disaster
Sad-eyed, and on the evil wrought;
For now the squares with lakes were studded,
Their torrents broad the streets had flooded,
And now forlorn and islanded
The palace seemed. The Emperor said

His generals (13) hurrying, through the byways!
From city's end to end they sped
Through storm and peril, bent on saving
The people, now in panic raving
And drowning in their houses there.
New-built, high up in Peter's Square
A corner mansion then ascended;
And where its lofty perron ended
Two sentry lions (14) stood at guard
Like living things, and kept their ward
With paw uplifted. Here, bareheaded,
Pale, rigid, arms across his breast,
Upon the creature's marble crest
Sat poor Yevgeny. But he dreaded
Nought for himself; he did not hear
The hungry rollers rising near
And on his very footsoles splashing,
Feel on his face the rainstorm lashing,
Or how the riotous, moaning blast
Had snatcht his hat. His eyes were fast
Fixt on one spot in desperation
Where from the deeps in agitation
The wicked waves like mountains rose,
Where the storm howled, and round were driven
Fragments of wreck.... There, God in Heaven!
Hard by the bay should stand, and close,
Alas, too close to the wild water,
A paintless fence, a willow-tree,
And there a frail old house should be
Where dwelt a widow, with a daughter
Parasha--and his dream was she!
His dream--or was it but a vision,
All that he saw? Was life also
An idle dream which in derision

Fate sends to mock us here below?

And he, as though a man enchanted
And on the marble pinned and planted,
Cannot descend, and round him lie
Only the waters. There, on high,
With Neva still beneath him churning,
Unshaken, on Yevgeny turning
His back, and with an arm flung wide,

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Behold the Image sit, and ride
Upon his brazen horse astride!"[15](#)

PART II

But now, with rack and ruin sated
And weary of her insolence
And uproar, Neva, still elated
With her rebellious turbulence,
Stole back, and left her booty stranded
And unregarded. So a bandit
Bursts with his horde upon a village
To smash and slay, destroy and pillage;
Whence yells, and violence, and alarms,
Gritting of teeth, and grievous harms
And wailings; then the evildoers
Rush home; but dreading the pursuers
And sagging with the stolen load
They drop their plunder on the road.

Meanwhile the water had abated
And pavements now uncovered lay;
And our Yevgeny, by dismay
And hope and longing agitated,
Sore-hearted to the river sped.
But still it lay disquieted
And still the wicked waves were seething

In pride of victory, as though
A flame were smoldering below;
And heavily was Neva breathing
Like to a horse besprent with foam
Who gallops from the battle home.

Yevgeny watches, and descrying
By happy chance a boat, goes flying
To hail the ferryman; and he,
Unhired and idle, willingly
Convoys him for a threepence, plying
Through that intimidating sea.
The old tried oarsman long contended
With the wild waters; hour by hour,
Sunk in the trough, the skiff descended
Mid rollers, ready to devour
Rash crew and all--at last contriving
To make the farther shore.

Arriving,
Yevgeny--evil is his lot!--
Runs to the old familiar spot
Down the old street,--and knows it not.

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All, to his horror, is demolished,
Leveled or ruined or abolished.
Houses are twisted all awry,
And some are altogether shattered,
Some shifted by the seas; and scattered
Are bodies, flung as bodies lie
On battlefields. Unthinkingly,
Half-fainting, and excruciated,
Yevgeny rushes on, awaited
By destiny with unrevealed
Tidings, as in a letter sealed.

He scours the suburb; and discerning
The bay, he knows the house is near;
And then stops short; ah, what is here!
Retreating, and again returning,
He looks--advances--looks again.
'Tis there they dwelt, the marks are plain;
There is the willow. Surely yonder
The gate was standing, in the past;
Now, washt away! No house!--O'er cast
With care, behold Yevgeny wander
Forever round and round the place,
And talk aloud, and strike his face
With his bare hand. A moment after,
He breaks into a roar of laughter.

The vapors of the night came down
Upon the terror-stricken town,
But all the people long debated
The doings of the day, and waited
And could not sleep. The morning light
From pale and weary clouds gleamed bright
On the still capital; no traces
Now of the woes of yesternight!
With royal purple it effaces
The mischief; all things are proceeding
In form and order as of old;
The people are already treading,
Impassive, in their fashion, cold,
Through the cleared thoroughfares, unheeding;
And now official folk forsake
Their last night's refuge, as they make
Their way to duty. Greatly daring,
The huckster now takes heart, unbarring
His cellar, late the prey and sack
Of Neva--hoping to get back
His heavy loss and wasted labor
Out of the pockets of his neighbor.

The drifted boats from each courtyard
Are carried.

To a certain bard,
A count, a favorite of heaven,
To one Khvostov (16), the theme was given
To chant in his immortal song
How Neva's shores had suffered wrong.

But my Yevgeny, poor, sick fellow!--
Alas, the tumult in his brain
Had left him powerless to sustain
Those shocks of terror. For the bellow
Of riotous winds and Neva near
Resounded always in his ear;
A host of hideous thoughts attacked him,
A kind of nightmare rent and racked him,
And on he wandered silently;
And as the week, the month, went by,
Never came home. His habitation,
As time ran out, the landlord took,
And leased the now deserted nook
For a poor poet's occupation.

Nor ever came Yevgeny home
For his belongings; he would roam,
A stranger to the world; his ration
A morsel tendered in compassion
Out of a window; he would tramp
All day, and on the quay would camp
To sleep; his garments, old and fraying,
Were all in tatters and decaying.
And the malicious boys would pelt
The man with stones; and oft he felt
The cabman's whiplash on him flicking;
For he had lost the skill of picking
His footsteps--deafened, it may be,
By fears that clamored inwardly.
So, dragging out his days, ill-fated,

He seemed like something miscreated,
No beast, nor yet of human birth,
Neither a denizen of earth
Nor phantom of the dead.

Belated

One night, on Neva wharf he slept.
Now summer days toward autumn crept;
A wet and stormy wind was blowing,
And Neva's sullen waters flowing
Splashed on the wharf and muttered there

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Complaining--beat the slippery stair
As suitors beat in supplication
Unheeded at a judge's door.
In gloom and rain, amid the roar
Of winds--a sound of desolation
With cries of watchmen interchanged
Afar, who through the darkness ranged--
Our poor Yevgeny woke; and daunted,
By well-remembered terrors haunted,
He started sharply, rose in haste,
And forth upon his wanderings paced;
--And halted on a sudden, staring
About him silently, and wearing
A look of wild alarm and awe.
Where had he come? for now he saw
The pillars of that lofty dwelling
Where, on the perron sentinelng,
Two lion-figures stand at guard
Like living things, keep watch and ward
With lifted paw. Upright and glooming,
Above the stony barrier looming,
The Image, with an arm flung wide,
Sat on his brazen horse astride.

And now Yevgeny, with a shiver
Of terror, felt his reason clear.
He knew the place, for it was here
The flood had gamboled, here the river
Had surged; here, rioting in their wrath,
The wicked waves had swept a path
And with their tumult had surrounded
Yevgeny, lions, square--and Him
Who, moveless and aloft and dim,
Our city by the sea had founded,
Whose will was Fate. Appalling there
He sat, begirt with mist and air.
What thoughts engrave His brow! what hidden
Power and authority He claims!
What fire in yonder charger flames!
Proud charger, whither art thou ridden,
Where leapest thou? and where, on whom,
Wilt plant thy hoof?--Ah, lord of doom
And potentate, 'twas thus, appearing

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Above the void, and in thy hold
A curb of iron, thou sat'st of old
O'er Russia, on her haunches rearing!
About the Image, at its base,
Poor mad Yevgeny circled, straining
His wild gaze upward at the face
That once o'er half the world was reigning.
His eye was dimmed, cramped was his breast,
His brow on the cold grill was pressed,
While through his heart a flame was creeping
And in his veins the blood was leaping.
He halted sullenly beneath
The haughty Image, clenched his teeth
And clasped his hands, as though some devil
Possessed him, some dark power of evil,
And shuddered, whispering angrily,
"Ay, architect, with thy creation

Of marvels.... Ah, beware of me!"
And then, in wild precipitation
He fled.

For now he seemed to see
The awful Emperor, quietly,
With momentary anger burning,
His visage to Yevgeny turning!
And rushing through the empty square,
He hears behind him as it were
Thunders that rattle in a chorus,
A gallop ponderous, sonorous,
That shakes the pavement. At full height,
Illumined by the pale moonlight,
With arm outflung, behind him riding
See, the bronze horseman comes, bestriding
The charger, clanging in his flight.
All night the madman flees; no matter
Where he may wander at his will,
Hard on his track with heavy clatter
There the bronze horseman gallops still.

Thereafter, whensoever straying
Across that square Yevgeny went
By chance, his face was still betraying
Disturbance and bewilderment.
As though to ease a heart tormented
His hand upon it he would clap
In haste, put off his shabby cap,
And never raise his eyes demented,
And seek some byway unfrequented.

A little island lies in view

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Along the shore; and here, belated,
Sometimes with nets a fisher-crew
Will moor and cook their long-awaited

And meager supper. Hither too
Some civil servant, idly floating,
Will come upon a Sunday, boating.
That isle is desolate and bare;
No blade of grass springs anywhere.
Once the great flood had sported, driving
The frail hut thither. Long surviving,
It floated on the water there
Like some black bush. A vessel plying
Bore it, last spring, upon her deck.
They found it empty, all a wreck;
And also, cold and dead and lying
Upon the threshold, they had found
My crazy hero. In the ground
His poor cold body there they hurried,
And left it to God's mercy, buried.

Notes

1. Pushkin describes the flood of November 7, 1824.
2. V. N. Berch was the author of *A Detailed Historical Account of All the Floods That Occurred in St. Petersburg* (St. Petersburg, 1826). Pushkin had this book in his library.
- 3 Peter the Great.
4. Petersburg.
5. In his footnote Pushkin states: "Algarotti has somewhere said: 'Pétersbourg est la fenêtre, par laquelle la Russie regarde en Europe.'" E. Algarotti (1712- 1764) was an Italian critic and philosopher.
6. Pushkin added in a footnote: "See Prince Vyazemsky's poem to the Countess Z. Conversation of April 7, 1832." (The poem was dedicated to Princess E. M. Zavadovsky.)
7. The spire on the roof of the building housing the Ministry of

the Navy.

8. The square in Petersburg on which military reviews took place.

9. Pushkin added in a footnote: "Mickiewicz, in one of his best poems, Oleszkiewicz, has in most beautiful lines described the day preceding the Petersburg flood. It is only a pity that his description is inaccurate. There was no snow--the Neva was not covered with ice. Our description is more correct, although it has none of the brilliant colors of the Polish poet."

10. N. M. Karamzin (1766-1826), famous Russian writer, poet, and historian. Pushkin has in mind Karamzin's celebrated *History of the Russian State*.

11. A suburb of Petersburg.

12. Alexander I

13. Pushkin added in a footnote: "Count Miloradovich and Adjutant-General Benckendorff." Count M. A. Miloradovich was the Governor-General of Petersburg; Count A. C. Benckendorff was the head of the Third Section of the Ministry of the Interior (Chief of the Secret Police).

14. The stone lions adorning the entrance to the Ministry of War building.

15. The monument of Peter the Great by E. M. Falconet (1710-1791).

16. Count D. I. Khvostov (1757-1835), a minor poet.