

Alexander Pushkin

The Bronze Horseman

(A Tale of St. Petersburg)

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Foreword

The incidents described in the story are based on fact. The details of the flood (1824) are taken from contemporary records. The curious may refer to the account (1826) given by Vasily Nikolayevitch Berkh, geographer and historian.

Introduction

On that shore, wave-swept and empty,
Deep in thought, *he* stood; intently
Gazing, seawards, while the strong
River, wide before him, slowly
Drew but the one frail skiff along.
All down its length, the marshy coast
A few moss-covered huts could boast,
The Chekhonts' meagre dwelling-site;
While the mist-veiled land played host
To forests shrouded from the light,
Where pine-trees sighed. 'From here', he thought,
'We'll threaten the bold Swede and, here,
A city shall be built to thwart

Our haughty neighbour, dwelling near.
Nature has destined her to be
A window on Europe, while we
Shall stand, as firm, beside the wave;
And flags of every land shall fly,
Offshore, and know the land thereby,
That these long-unknown waters lave.’

A hundred years ago – and now,
A youthful city, rich in beauty,
Wood and swamp tamed by his vow,
Rises, wondrously and proudly,
Where once the Finnish fisherman,
That sad foster-child of Nature,
On these flat shores, for a lifespan
Cast his frail net o’er the water;
And, here, the land displays a host
Of palaces; they line the coast,
A throng of towers, fair and slender,
And, from the corners of the earth,
The ships come, jostling, to berth,
To view the city in her splendour;
The Neva, dressed in granite, flows
Beneath strong bridges; gardens, there,
Adorn her isles, her beauties share;
Dark green against blue water shows.
Our capital, so much the younger,
Makes ancient Moscow seem faded,
As beside a new tsarina,
A widowed empress seems jaded.

I love you, Peter’s creation,
I love you, gracious and austere;
The Neva’s powerful libation,
Twixt granite banks, so pure and clear;
Your cast-iron patterned railings;
Your pensive nights of moonless light,
Transparent dusk’s endless evenings,
When, lamp-less, I yet read and write,
While the sleeping buildings show
Still, pale, above the streets below,
The Admiralty spire still bright;
While, granting one half-hour to night,

One half-light yields to another,
Refusing to allow the dark
Those last gilded clouds to smother,
And brightening still the silent park.
I love your winters, harsh with frost,
The still air, girls' faces redder
Than crimson roses, to their cost,
The sledges raced along the river;
Loud noise, bright lights, the ball, a game
Of cards at evening, idle drinking,
The punch-bowl wreathed in its blue flame,
The hiss of charged glasses clinking.
I love to view a martial vigour
Stir the Field of Mars, the beauty,
Monotonous, of infantry,
The swaying cavalry, ever
In harmony, banners held high,
All torn and tattered from the fight,
Brass helmets, glinting in the light;
Battle-scarred, proudly they go by.
I love you, warlike capital,
The rising smoke, the cannons' roar,
When our Tsarina adds a mortal
Son to the Imperial store.
Or Russia, triumphing once more,
Defeats the broken enemy;
Or when, its blue ice fracturing,
The Neva bears it to the sea,
Rejoicing in the birth of Spring.

Stand proudly, Peter's great city,
The elements, now tamed, at last
At peace with you; and, finally,
Let Finnish enmity be past
Those waves in their captivity
Still bear for you; let them forget
To stir, in their vain malice fret,
Or trouble Peter's endless sleep!

A dreadful time there was...I keep
The memory of it fresh, as ever;
My friends, a story I shall tell,
Those sorry days I'll remember,

A tale of woe, as it befell.

Part One

November, chill, autumnal, sad,
Breathed over darkened Petrograd,
The waters splashing, noisily,
Against the borders of the city,
The Neva like a patient, weary,
Tossing and turning, restlessly.
It was already late, the rain
Beat angrily against the pane,
The howling wind blew, mournfully,
When, home from his dear friends, there came
A young man, Yevgeny by name...
At least I'll call him so for, truly
It's one I know, from many a line,
And then the sound of it seems fine,
It flows from off my pen indeed.
His surname, though, we shall not need;
Yet, in many a day gone by,
Perhaps its light might well have shone,
It might have caught Karamzin's eye,
One that some tale was founded on,
Neglected now by fame or rumour,
Remembered only in Kolomna.
Our hero is a clerk, serves humbly,
Nor boasts he of nobility,
Of his dead ancestors thinks not,
Nor ancient times, now long forgot.

Once home, Yevgeny (or Eugene!)
Removed his coat, undressed, lay down,
But failed to sleep, in thoughts did drown,
Of where he was, and where he'd been,
And of what else? That he was poor,
Forced to labour, for evermore,
To maintain his independence,
His honour, and his self-respect;
That God was miserly, and hence
Both brains and riches did reject
In his endowment; that there were

Fine folk that seemed much happier,
Dull-minded sloths, idle but blessed!
That he had worked a scant two years;
That this rain, adding to his fears,
Would never end; as for the rest,
That the river rose full quickly,
The bridges they'd closed, so swiftly,
That he'd not his Parasha see,
It seemed, for some two days or three.
And here Yevgeny sighed deeply,
And then he dreamed, like any poet:

‘Marriage? Why not undergo it?
Though there's every difficulty;
I'm young, I'm healthy, and I'm quite
Prepared to labour day and night;
I'll find a place for us to stay,
Where Parasha shall be content,
Simple, humble, not much to pay.
A year or two of effort spent –
I'll win promotion then; while she
I'll trust to bear our family,
Raise the children, without fuss...
And so, we'll live, and so we'll die,
Hand in hand; and, tear in eye,
Our grandchildren will bury us...’

Thus, he dreamt. And full of sorrow
All that night he dozed, and wished
The storm-wind was not howling so,
And that the rain would not insist
On beating on the window-pane,
So wrathfully...till finally
He closed his eyes. And now, the day's
Pale light, once more, shone clearly,
Piercing through the night's thick haze...
A dreadful dawn!

 All night, the Neva,
Flowed to the sea, against the storm...
Its boiling waves, a mighty swarm,
Failing that sheer power to conquer...
By morning crowds had come to view,
Thronging the river-banks and shore,

The jets of spray, flung up anew,
From out the foaming water's roar.
By Gulf winds now blocked and barred,
The Neva, seething, thwarted, angry,
Thus, driven back once more, fell hard
Upon her islands, flooded deeply.
The weather still increased in fury,
The swollen river, rushing loudly,
Churned and swirled, a violent cauldron,
And then, a beast run wild, swept on
Towards the city, while, before her,
She drove all things, till all around
Was vacancy while, underground,
The cellars filled; foul water poured
Through gratings, deeper yet it bored;
Till drowned Petropolis now stood,
Like Triton, waist-deep midst the flood.

Attack! Assault! Wave on wave heaves
Through the windows – bold as thieves
They enter – loose boats smash the panes.
A shroud of trays floats, midst remains
Of huts, the logs, and struts, and ridges,
Planks, and rails, of shattered bridges,
Trade goods, hoarded thriftily,
The flotsam of sad poverty,
While coffins from the graveyard sail
Along the streets! The people fear
God's wrath, the Judgement Day is here.
Food, shelter, every hope, must fail!
Who will provide? In that dread year,
The late Tsar ruled still, Alexander,
Of great glory; now stunned, he stood,
On his balcony, o'er the flood,
And murmured: 'No king can master
God's own elements.' Then, he sat,
And, with mournful gaze, surveyed
The chaos there below, all that
Broad lake the waters now had made,
To which the streets yet more conveyed,
Wide rivers flowing, round an island,
His palace, midst the water moored.
The Tsar spoke; his generals manned

Every last boat, and once aboard
Sailed the streets, both far and near,
Scorning danger, bringing rescue
To shoals of half-drowned people who
Were overwhelmed by loss and fear.

And there, where on Peter's Square
A new-built mansion rose, just there,
Where on the lofty portico,
Two lions stand to guard the door,
As if alive, with upraised paw,
A cross clasped in his hands, just so,
Yevgeny, pale and full of woe,
Sat on one creature's marble back,
And fearless of the storm's attack,
While fearing for his other, he
Heard not the wind's cacophony,
Not seeing how the water rose
Washed at his soles, so greedily,
Nor felt the rain, in his sad pose,
His hat whipped from him, savagely;
His desperate gaze instead was fixed
On some far point, while angry waves
Rose from the depths and, raging, mixed,
Tearing the dead from out their graves,
And, mountainous, loomed up, on high,
Where wreckage floated neath the sky,
Drifting, aimless... Oh God, yes, there –
Close to the waves, not far from where,
A willow-tree, a broken fence,
A shabby hut, formed sole defence,
For a widow and her daughter,
His Parasha – was this a dream,
A mere dream, in which he sought her?
Or is our whole life, its bright gleam,
Only an empty dream, from birth;
High heaven's jest against the Earth?

There he sat, like a man bewitched,
And to that marble creature hitched,
Unable to dismount! While, wide,
The water stretched on every side!
And, back turned to him, in its might,

Above the Neva's angry course,
Upon its still unshaken height,
Its hand extended, on the right,
The great bronze idol on its horse.

Part Two

But now, sated with destruction,
And weary of blind arrogance,
The Neva ended its advance,
Proud of its indignant ruction,
Abandoning its prey; the action
Of a cut-throat band who pillage
Some poor unsuspecting village,
Is much the same; the pain, the blows,
The screaming, howling, thus it goes!...
Then burdened from their robbery,
Exhausted, fearing swift pursuit,
The bandits vanish with their loot,
Scattering their leavings, randomly.

The waters ebbed, the streets were free,
And Yevgeny, nigh rendered mute
By hope and anguish, fearfully,
Pursued the fast-receding Neva;
Yet, un-resigned, the angry river
Triumphing in its victory,
Still stirred and boiled furiously,
The waters foaming in their bed,
As if a flame beneath them seethed,
While heavily the river breathed,
Much like a steed from battle sped.
Yevgeny gazed, and spied a boat;
A godsend – whole, and still afloat;
He called to the carefree ferryman,
Who'd risk the treacherous water,
For a coin – ten-kopecks, silver –
And so, to the skiff Yevgeny ran.

Long time the skilful oarsman fought
The stormy waters, seeking land,
The daring voyager's journey fraught

With danger; yet, tossed high and caught
By seething waves on either hand,
They reached the shore, at last.

Then he
Sought, through streets, once familiar,
And now all turned to one similar
Watery wasteland, sad to see!
On every side, soaked debris lies,
Damp ruins open to the skies;
Here stands a yawning façade, there
A shattered house, its walls laid bare,
Lapped by the waves; and all around
Corpses, as on some battleground.
Yevgeny, by his fears tormented
Wearied by thoughts too hard to bear,
Ran swiftly, like a man demented,
Headlong, through the streets, to where
Fate waited now, its face unshown,
As with some letter, closely sealed;
Here's the Gulf, all will be known,
The cottage near, the truth revealed...
What's this?

He halted, then retraced
His steps...turned...looked again...and faced
A willow tree, still standing – surely,
The gate was here once? No more; he
Circled quickly, mind full of care,
Struggling to comprehend it all,
Ran back and forth, and everywhere,
Beset by thoughts that must appall.
No sign of a hut could he see.
He struck his forehead, suddenly,
And laughed aloud.

Night fell swiftly;
Fog shrouded the shivering city;
Those left, with little hope of sleep,
Amongst themselves did vigil keep,
And spoke of the day past.

Dawn's light,
Through pallid clouds, dull to the sight,
Glared on the capital, below
And lit the streets, now free of blight,
All things veiled in a crimson glow.

Many an ill once set aright,
Order, returned, dispelled the night;
The roads and pavements now were free,
Folk strolled there, unconcernedly,
Officialdom left for work once more,
While a brave merchant, with a store
Of wares the Neva failed to take,
Gathered whatever he'd not lost,
Ready to sell his stock, and make
His losses good, at his neighbour's cost.
Now, stranded boats were carted off
From damp courtyards.

And Count Khvostov,
Poet beloved of the Muse,
Swiftly, in deathless verse, the news
Soon wrought, for every Romanov.

But as for my poor Yevgeny...
His troubled mind could not withstand
The shock dealt him so cruelly,
The mutinous waves on either hand
The Neva's turmoil, the wind's roar,
Rang in his ears and, all unmanned,
He wandered on that lonely shore,
Tormented by nightmarish thought.
A week, a month passed – unsought,
He returned to his rooms no more,
And his poor lodgings were acquired,
Soon rented, when the term expired,
To some poet; now, travelling light,
Oblivious to the world he strayed,
Sleeping beside the quays at night,
Of beggar's scraps a meal he made.
He was a miserable sight;
Torn clothes his poverty displayed,
At every seam now torn and frayed;
At him, children threw their stones;
And since he wandered in the road,
Many a coachman lashed his bones;
Too dazed to notice, on he strode;
Despite the outward noise and glare,
Deaf to all but his own thought,
His own sad company he sought

An inner world of grief and care.
So, he dragged out his mortal span
Remaining, neither beast nor man,
Not this, nor that, without a place,
In this world or the next...

One night,
Caught in slumber's rare embrace,
On the embankment, out of sight,
Beside the Neva, summer quite
Turned to autumn where he slept,
The gusting breeze a vigil kept,
A shadowy wave lapped the shore,
Like some petitioner at the door,
Unheard by justice, while the foam
Against the granite steps beat home.
The sleeper woke, the air was gloomy,
The chill wind sighed dejectedly,
Rain fell as, far-off, some sentry
Called, and up leapt our Yevgeny...
The past, the horrors he recalled,
He stumbled, hastily, appalled,
Along the quay, and suddenly
Halting, a wild look on his face,
Found himself beneath a stately
Mansion's pillars; there, in place
As guards, as if alive, paws raised,
Sat two stone lions, unamazed,
And there, upon its granite height,
Above the Neva's darkened course,
Its hand outstretched towards the night,
The great bronze idol on its horse.

Yevgeny shuddered. Fear had fled
His mind, and brought fresh clarity;
He knew that place, where, formerly,
The waves upon the storm had fed,
Angered, in their wild rebellion.
He knew the lions, and the mansion,
The square, and looming, motionless,
He, who with a will unbounded,
A city on the marshland founded;
His bronze head shrouded in darkness...
Fearsome, in the depths of night!

Upon that brow what thoughts alight!
What does that hidden power intend!
And, in that steed, what fiery force!
Where do you gallop to, proud horse?
Where will your upraised hooves descend?
O Lord of Fate, did you not, like this,
Raise Russia, on hind legs, to the sky,
Curbed by its iron bit, poised high
On the fearful brink of the abyss?

Our poor madman paced around,
Until his gaze the face unfurled
Of one who'd straddled half the world;
And there, before it, stood his ground.
His chest was tight, his brow was cold
Against the railing. Dark mists rolled
Across his sight; his blood boiling,
Yevgeny stood there, gloomily,
Before that proud bronze effigy,
With gritted teeth, his fists clenching,
As if possessed by some dark force,
'Fine, O wondrous founder, truly!' –
He muttered, shaking, vengefully –
'Fine work!' then, stumbling in his course,
He ran headlong, for suddenly,
It seemed to him, the mighty Tsar,
Had slowly turned his head, while, far
Within, deep fires flared, angrily...
He fled across the empty square,
Yet heard the sound, behind him there –
Much like the rumbling of thunder –
Of heavy hooves; the pavement, under
Him, rang loud, and seemed to move,
For lit by the pale moon, above,
His right hand stretched towards the sky,
Came on, apace, the Bronze Horseman,
On his swift horse, that loomed on high;
And, all night long, the poor madman,
No matter where he turned his feet,
Heard, in pursuit, the Bronze Horseman,
Behind his back, as great hooves beat.

From that moment on, whenever

He chanced to enter that same square,
Confusion filled his face; moreover,
He'd clutch his heart, in quiet despair,
And, swiftly, in guilty terror,
As if admitting to some error,
Nor seeking now to raise his eyes,
He'd sidle past.

An island lies

A little way offshore, and there
Some fisherman may land his haul,
And dine at night; or some clerk call,
One Sunday, and its silence share.
Upon it not a grass-blade grows,
There the flood, one must suppose,
In its wide wanderings, to and fro,
Had cast aground a shattered hut,
That, once ashore, had then stayed put,
And lay, above the tidal flow,
Like a black bush, drowned and stranded.
A barge, last Spring, cast anchor there,
While a gang of workmen landed,
To load its timbers, dry and bare;
And at its threshold, there they found,
Our madman lying, cold and dead;
And raising him, at foot and head,
Buried him, in that sacred ground.

The End of 'The Bronze Horseman'