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Publisher’s Foreword

This is one of a series of volumes being published by Alma Classics that will present the complete works of Alexander Pushkin in English. The series will be a successor to the fifteen-volume Complete Works of Alexander Pushkin published by Milner and Company between 1999 and 2003, the rights to which now rest with Alma Classics. Some of the translations contained in the new volumes are reprints or revisions of those in the Milner edition, others are entirely new – as with this edition of Belkin’s Stories and A History of Goryúkhino Village, which replaces Volume 8 of the Milner set. The aim of the series is to build on the Milner edition’s work in giving readers in the English-speaking world access to the entire corpus of Pushkin’s writings in readable modern versions that are faithful to Pushkin’s meaning and spirit.

The Milner edition volumes were only available in hardback and as a set. Alma Classics, however, are offering the present Pushkin in English paperbacks for purchase individually.

In publishing this series Alma Classics wish to pay a warm tribute to the initiative and drive of the late Iain Sproat, managing director and owner of Milner and Company and chairman of the original project’s editorial board, in achieving the publication of Pushkin’s complete works in English for the first time. Scholars, lovers of Pushkin and general readers wishing to gain knowledge of one of Europe’s finest writers owe him the heartiest admiration and gratitude.

– Alessandro Gallenzi
OTHER WORKS OF ALEXANDER PUSHKIN
AVAILABLE FROM ALMA CLASSICS:

Ruslan and Lyudmila, a dual-language text
trans. Roger Clarke, 2009

Boris Godunov and Little Tragedies
trans. Roger Clarke, 2010

Eugene Onegin, a dual-language text
trans. Roger Clarke, 2011

The Queen of Spades and Other Stories
trans. Paul Debreczeny, 2011

The Captain’s Daughter and A History of Pugachov
trans. Paul Debreczeny, 2012

Love Poems
ed. Roger Clarke, 2013
Introduction

This book contains two prose works by Alexander Pushkin, both written in the autumn of 1830: his Belkin’s Stories, which was published in 1831, and his History of Goryúkhino Village, which he never published and left uncompleted when he died in 1837. Belkin’s Stories was Pushkin’s first completed and published work of prose fiction.

Belkin’s Stories (Póvesti Bélkina in Russian) has usually gone under the English title of The Tales of Belkin. I have changed the English title for two reasons. First, there is ambiguity in The Tales of Belkin: it could be understood either as “The Tales about Belkin” (wrongly) or as “The Tales produced by Belkin” (correctly); “Belkin’s Stories” makes this clearer. Secondly, the word “tales” is misleading, because it is used in English of stories about long ago or stories that are fanciful and improbable; but Belkin’s stories are set within the historical Russia of Belkin’s (and Pushkin’s) lifetime, and Belkin claims that they are “in large part true”. “Tales” is therefore a misnomer.

The presentation of Belkin’s Stories is unusual and complex. The work purports to be a set of five stories that Iván Petróvich Belkin has heard from four different narrators and written down; the stories are prefaced by a short foreword entitled “From the
Editor”, a man identified in the first edition simply as “A.P.”, who has allegedly come into possession of the now deceased Belkin’s manuscript and is publishing the stories along with biographical data about Belkin that he has obtained from a friend of the dead man. But this framework, too, is fictional: Belkin is as much a creation of Pushkin as the five stories, and for this reason the foreword itself is sometimes described as a sixth story.

On the surface Belkin’s five stories are straightforward: clear, fast-moving, easy to read. The plots hold the attention right up to the (usually surprising) denouement; the characters are well drawn, true to life and intriguingly open-ended; there is plenty of humour; and (save in the mock formality of the foreword) the writing is lucid and terse – “precision and brevity” were Pushkin’s watchwords for prose writing. But the smooth surface of the Stories is deceptive. Underneath, as explained in the Extra Material (p. 165), there are strong currents and cross-currents that can carry the reader in unexpected directions. One particularly powerful current is that of literary parody and allusion. Pushkin is constantly calling up other literary works, then mimicking them, subverting them or using them to deepen our understanding of plot and character. Another current is that of autobiography: Pushkin frequently smuggles events and situations from his own life into the Stories. Still deeper down, notably in the foreword, political currents can be discerned, carefully hidden though they had to be from the imperial censorship.
INTRODUCTION

A History of Goryúkhino Village is a separate work, but linked to the Stories because it too purports to have been written by Belkin. Much of it is taken up by a discursive autobiography of the author, filling out the information supplied in the foreword to the Stories. The History is a comic work, making fun of certain current historians and other writers and their intellectual and literary pretensions and venturing a guarded critique of conditions in the Russian countryside. Both the parody and the social comment are more overt than in the Stories, which is no doubt why, before Pushkin had completed the work, he realized that the censors would never pass it for publication.

Readers will get much enjoyment from a simple read of both these works of Pushkin’s, but those with the time and interest are recommended to explore the main subtexts through the Notes and the Extra Material in this volume. This will heighten their appreciation of two entertaining and intriguing pieces of Russian literature and of their author.

– Roger Clarke
April 2014
Mrs Prostakóva: You see, my dear sir, he’s loved his stories ever since he was little.

Skitínin: Mitrofán takes after me.

— The Young Hopeful*
From the Editor

When we undertook the task of publishing I.P. Belkin’s stories, which we are now presenting to the public, we wanted to preface them with a résumé, however brief, of the late author’s life; our wish was thereby to satisfy in some measure the legitimate curiosity of those who love our Russian literature. We intended to turn for this purpose to Márya Alexándrovna Trafílina, Iván Petróvich Belkin’s heiress and next of kin; but sadly she was unable to provide us with any information about the deceased, as she had been entirely unacquainted with him. She advised us to make application to a respected gentleman who had been Iván Petróvich’s friend. We took this advice and received the following welcome response to our letter. Let us print it, without any alteration or comment,* as the precious memorial of a lofty mind and of a touching friendship – and as a fully adequate biographical record.

My Dear Sir, ——— ———,

I had the honour to receive on 23rd of this month your most esteemed letter of 15th of the same, in which you inform me of your wish to learn particulars of the dates of birth and death, the career, the domestic circumstances and also the pursuits and
qualities of the late Iván Petróvich Belkin, once my true friend and neighbouring landowner. It is with great pleasure that I give effect to your wish and forward to you, my dear Sir, all that I can recollect both from his discourse and from my own personal observation.

Iván Petróvich Belkin was born in 1798 of honourable and noble parentage in the village of Goryúkhino. His late father, Captain Pyótr Ivánovich Belkin, had married Pelagéya Gavrílovna, of the Trafilin family. He was not a wealthy man, but abstemious and, in the field of estate management, extremely capable. Their son received a basic education from the local parish clerk. It was evidently to this esteemed personage that he owed his enthusiasm for reading and for endeavours in the field of Russian letters. In 1815 he enlisted with a light infantry regiment (which of them I do not recall), in which he continued to serve right up to 1823. The deaths of his parents, which occurred almost at the same time, obliged him to apply for a discharge and travel back to Goryúkhino, his ancestral property.

Once in control of the estate, Iván Petróvich, by reason of his inexperience and pliancy, neglected its management and relaxed the strict regime that his late father had established. He dismissed the punctilious and alert village elder, with whom his peasants (in their usual way) were discontented, and he entrusted the administration of the village to his aged housekeeper, who had gained his confidence by her skill at storytelling.
This foolish old woman was never able to distinguish a twenty-five rouble note from a fifty; the peasants, who all saw her as their auntie, had no fear of her whatsoever; the village elder whom they elected indulged and abetted their trickery to the point where Iván Petróvich was forced to abolish their compulsory farm labour and introduce a very modest rent in lieu. Even then the peasants exploited his weakness and won themselves a special waiver for the first year; then in subsequent years they paid two thirds and more of the rent in cobnuts, cranberries and suchlike – and there were still arrears.

As an erstwhile friend of Iván Petróvich’s late father, I considered it a duty to proffer my advice to the son too, and I repeatedly volunteered to re-establish the old regime that he had allowed to lapse. For this purpose I rode to his place one day, demanded the estate ledgers, summoned the rascally elder and engaged in an examination of the records in Iván Petróvich’s presence. At first the young squire took to following me with all possible diligence and attention. It transpired, however, from the accounts that over the past two years the number of peasants had risen while the number of poultry and cattle were said to have fallen. At that point Iván Petróvich, satisfied with this initial information, listened to me no further; and at the very moment when my investigations and strict questioning had brought the rogue of an elder to total confusion and had reduced him to absolute silence, I heard Iván Petróvich, to my intense annoyance, snoring loudly in his chair. From that
time on I ceased to interfere in his domestic dispensations and
delivered up his affairs (as he did himself) to the dispensation
of the Almighty.

Nevertheless, this did not in the least disturb our friendly
relations; for I felt sorry for Iván Petróvich’s feeble-mindedness
and the ruinous indolence that is so common in young noble-
men of our day, and I was genuinely fond of him. Indeed one
could not help liking such a gentle and honest young man.
For his part, Iván Petróvich always showed respect for my
age and was deeply attached to me. To the very end of his
life he met me almost every day, valuing my straightforward
manner of talk, even though for the most part we resembled
each other neither in way of life, nor in turn of mind, nor
in character.

Iván Petróvich led a most abstemious life and shunned any
kind of excess; I never observed him “under the influence”
(which in our parts can be counted an unprecedented phenom-
enon). It is true that he had a marked susceptibility to the female
sex, but there was in him a quite virginal shyness…

Besides the stories that you are pleased to mention in your
letter, Iván Petróvich left a multitude of manuscripts, some
of which have found their way into my possession, though
others have been used by his housekeeper for various domestic
requirements. Thus last winter all the windows of her quarters

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1 There follows an anecdote that we have not included here, deeming it superfluous; let us assure the reader, nevertheless, that it contains nothing prejudicial to Iván Petróvich’s memory.
were stuffed up with the first section of a novel that he had left unfinished. The aforementioned stories were apparently his first venture. According to Iván Petróvich, they are in large part true and had been picked up by him from various individuals. Nonetheless, almost all the personal names in them he invented himself; and the apppellations of estates and villages he borrowed from our neighbourhood, which accounts for my own estate being mentioned somewhere; this occurred not from any ulterior motive, but simply from lack of imagination.

In the autumn of 1828 Iván Petróvich came down with a feverish cold, which developed into influenza, and he died, notwithstanding the untiring efforts of our local doctor, a man of the greatest skill, especially in the treatment of chronic complaints like corns and so on. He passed away in my arms in his thirtieth year and was buried in Goryúkhino village church, close to his late parents.

Iván Petróvich was of middling height; he had grey eyes, fair hair, a straight nose and a pale and gaunt complexion.

There you have, my dear Sir, all that I can recall pertaining to the way of life, activities, character and outward appearance of my late neighbour and friend. But in the event that you think fit to use this letter of mine in any way, I most humbly ask that

1 In fact, in Mr Belkin’s manuscript there is written in the author’s hand above each story: “Heard by me from [such-and-such a person]” (with rank or position, and initials). We record for interested researchers: ‘The Postmaster’ was narrated to him by Titular Counsellor A.G.N.; ‘The Shot’ by Lieutenant Colonel I.L.P.; ‘The Undertaker’ by the manager B.V.; and ‘The Blizzard’ and ‘Young Miss Peasant’ by Miss K.I.T.
you make no mention whatsoever of my name; for, although I have the greatest respect and liking for writers, I see no point in entering that profession; and indeed, at my age, it would be unseemly.

With the most sincere regards, etc.

Nenarádovo village, 16th November 1830*

We consider it our duty to respect the wish of our author’s esteemed friend, so let us offer him our deepest thanks for the information furnished to us, and hope that the public will appreciate the honesty and good nature with which it has been provided.

— A. P.*
The Shot*

CHAPTER I

We fought a duel.
— Baratýnsky*

I swore to shoot him dead, as duelling rules allowed. (It was now my turn to shoot.)
— ‘An Evening under Canvas’*

We were stationed in a little place called ——. A regular officer’s routine is well known: mornings, drill and horsemanship; dinner with the regiment’s colonel or in a Jewish tavern; evenings, punch and cards. In —— there was not a single house offering hospitality, and not a single marriageable girl. We used to congregate in each other’s quarters, where all we saw were our own uniforms.

There was just one chap in our circle who was not a soldier. He was about thirty-five – so to us an old man. Experience set him above us on many counts, and a habitual surliness, an abrupt manner and a malicious tongue gave him a strong hold on our youthful minds. A certain mystery clung round his life: he seemed Russian, but had a foreign name. He had once served in the
Belkin’s Stories

hussars, successfully too. No one knew what had impelled him to resign his commission and settle in that wretched little place, where he lived at once both frugally and extravagantly: he forever went round on foot in a threadbare black coat, but he would keep open house for all the officers of our regiment. True, his dinner consisted of just two or three courses, cooked by an ex-serviceman, but for all that the champagne flowed like a river. No one knew either his wealth or his income, and no one dared question him on it. He had plenty of books, mostly about warfare, but novels too. He would readily lend them out to read, never demanding them back; conversely, a book he had borrowed he never returned. His main pastime was pistol shooting. The walls of his room were all riddled with bullet holes, all crazed like a honeycomb. A huge collection of pistols was the only luxury in the clay-walled cottage where he lived. The skill he had attained was amazing, and if he had proposed shooting a pear off anyone’s cap, no one in our regiment would have baulked at offering him his head. Our conversation frequently touched on duels; but Silvio (that is what I shall call him) never took part. If we asked if he had ever fought a duel, he would answer tartly that he had, but never went into detail; and it was clear that he found such questions distasteful. We supposed that a hapless victim of this grim sport was weighing on his conscience. Certainly it never entered our heads to suspect him of anything like cowardice. There are people whose very bearing banishes such suspicions. An unexpected incident surprised us all.
One day some ten of us officers were dining at Silvio’s. We were drinking in our usual way – that is, very heavily. After the meal we began to urge our host to open us a bank for cards. For long he resisted, as he hardly ever played. But eventually he sent for cards, spread fifty ten-rouble coins on the table, and sat down to deal. We clustered round him, and the game commenced. It was Silvio’s practice at cards to keep absolute silence. He never argued, and never offered explanations. If a punter miscalculated, Silvio immediately either paid up the shortfall or noted down the excess. We were aware of this, and never tried to stop him hosting the game his own way. But among us was an officer who had been newly transferred. He joined in the game at once, and inadvertently doubled the stake. Silvio took some chalk and entered the higher figure in his usual way. The officer, believing that the mistake was Silvio’s, launched into protests. Silvio continued to deal in silence. The officer, losing patience, took a duster and rubbed out what he took for an incorrect entry. Silvio took the chalk and made the entry again. The officer, inflamed by the wine, the game and the company’s laughter, felt himself cruelly wronged; in his fury he seized a bronze candlestick off the table and launched it at Silvio, who barely managed to dodge the blow. We were aghast. Silvio stood up, turned pale with wrath and, eyes flashing, said: “My good sir, be so kind as to leave, and give thanks to God that this took place in my house.”

We were in no doubt what would follow and considered our new comrade a dead man already. The officer went out, having declared
that he was ready to answer for the offence in whatever way Mr Banker pleased. The game continued a few minutes longer; but we sensed that our host was in no mood for playing, so we gave up one after another and dispersed to our rooms, chatting about the forthcoming vacancy.

The next day at horse-riding we were already asking if the wretched lieutenant was still alive, when he turned up among us in person. We all put the same question to him. He replied that he had no news yet about Silvio. That surprised us. We walked to Silvio’s and found him outdoors, lodging bullet after bullet into an ace that had been stuck to the gate. He received us in his usual fashion, saying not a word about the previous day’s incident. Three days passed; the lieutenant remained alive. Surprised, we kept wondering if Silvio was really not going to fight. Silvio did not fight. He accepted the briefest of apologies and made his peace.

This might well have done him huge damage in the eyes of us youngsters. A failure of courage is the most unpardonable thing of all to young people, who normally see daring as the peak of all human virtues and as an excuse for every vice imaginable. Nonetheless, it was all gradually forgotten, and Silvio regained his earlier ascendancy.

I alone could no longer warm to him. By nature I had a romantic imagination, and till now I had felt a stronger bond than anyone with a man whose life was an enigma and whom I had viewed as the hero of some mysterious tale. He was fond of me; at least, I was the only one with whom he put aside his normal cutting
and ill-humoured way of speaking and talked of various matters straightforwardly and with uncharacteristic civility. But after that unhappy evening the thought that a stain on his honour had been left unexpunged at his own choice... that thought never left me and stopped me behaving to him as I had before. I felt ashamed to look at him. Silvio was too alert and experienced not to see this and divine its cause. It seemed to rankle; at least I noticed in him once or twice a wish to have it out; but I avoided such openings, and Silvio gave up on me. From then on I only met him in the company of friends, and our old frank conversations came to an end.

Harassed St Petersburgers have no concept of many sensations that are so familiar to those who dwell in the country or in small towns – looking forward to the day the mail is delivered, for example. On Tuesdays and Fridays our regimental headquarters was filled with officers, some expecting money, some letters, some newspapers. Packets were usually unsealed on the spot, news was exchanged, and the office presented a scene of the utmost animation. Silvio too used to receive letters through our regiment and was usually there. On one occasion he was delivered a packet from which he tore the seal with an expression of extreme impatience. As he scanned the letter his eyes flashed. The officers were each preoccupied with their own mail and noticed nothing.

“Gentlemen,” Silvio addressed them, “circumstances demand my immediate departure. I shall travel tonight. I hope you won’t refuse to dine with me for the last time. I expect you too,” he continued, turning to me, “I expect you, without fail.” With these
words he left in haste. The rest of us agreed to meet at Silvio’s and went off each to our own place.

I arrived at Silvio’s at the time arranged and found almost the whole regiment there. All his belongings were already packed. Nothing was left but the bare bullet-riddled walls. We sat down at table. The host was in excellent humour, and his good spirits soon spread through the company. Corks popped by the minute; glasses frothed and hissed without interruption; and in the heartiest manner possible we wished the traveller a safe journey and every good fortune. It was already late in the evening when we got up from table. As we sorted our caps, Silvio bade everyone goodbye, but just as I was preparing to leave he took me by the arm and said softly: “I need to speak with you.” I stayed behind.

The guests had departed; the two of us remained. We sat opposite each other and lit our pipes in silence. Silvio was sunk in thought; there was no longer any trace of his compulsive cheerfulness. His sombre pallor, his gleaming eyes and the thick smoke that issued from his mouth gave him the look of a devil incarnate. A few minutes passed before Silvio broke the silence. “It may be that we shall never meet again,” he said. “Before we part I wanted to explain myself to you. You may have noticed that I’ve little respect for the opinions of strangers; but you I’m fond of, and I sense that it would weigh heavily on me to leave a false impression in your mind.”

He paused and began to fill his pipe, which had burnt out. I lowered my eyes and kept silent.
“You thought it strange,” he continued, “that I didn’t demand satisfaction from that drunken idiot R—. You’ll acknowledge that, entitled as I was to choose the weapon, I had his life in my hands, while my own was all but out of danger. I could attribute my restraint to pure magnanimity, but I don’t want to lie. If I could have punished R— without endangering my life at all, then I’d not have let him off for anything.”

I looked at Silvio in astonishment. Such an admission completely baffled me. Silvio continued:

“That’s it precisely. I’ve no right to expose myself to death. Six years ago I received a slap in the face, and my assailant’s still alive.”

This made me intensely curious. “You never fought him?” I asked. “I suppose circumstances came between you?”

“I did fight him,” Silvio replied. “And here’s the memento of our duel.”

Silvio got up and took from a cardboard box a braided red cap with a golden tassel (what the French call a bonnet de police). He put it on. It had a bullet hole within a few centimetres of the forehead.

“You’re aware,” continued Silvio, “that I served in the —— regiment of hussars. You know my temperament: I’m used to coming first, but as a young man that was my passion. In our day it was fashionable to be rowdy: I was the rowdiest chap in the army. We took pride in drunkenness: I outdrank the famous Burtsóv, whom Denis Davydov celebrated.* In our regiment duels took place constantly: in every one I was either a witness or an active party.

THE SHOT
My comrades idolized me; but the regimental commanders, who kept changing all the time, regarded me as a plague beyond remedy.

“I was quietly (or not so quietly) revelling in my reputation, when there joined our ranks a young man of rich and illustrious family (I’d rather not name him). Never in my life had I encountered such a well-favoured and brilliant chap! Just imagine: youth, brains, good looks, the most outrageous high spirits, the most reckless bravery, a resonant surname, money beyond his reckoning or his ability to spend – just think what an impact he must have made among us. My supremacy was shaken. Mesmerized by my reputation, he made as if to seek my friendship, but I treated him coldly, and he distanced himself from me without regret. I came to hate him. His successes in the regiment and in female company reduced me to utter desperation. I began to pick quarrels with him; he responded to my epigrams with epigrams that always seemed to me cleverer and sharper than my own, and that were in fact incomparably funnier. His were jokes, but mine were slanders. Finally, one day there was a ball at a Polish landowner’s: seeing that he was the object of attention from all the ladies, but especially the hostess herself, with whom I was having an affair, I whispered in his ear some piece of coarse vulgarity. Incensed, he slapped me on the face. We reached for our swords; ladies swooned; people pulled us apart; so that very night we rode off to fight.

“By now it was first light. I stood at the designated spot with my three seconds. With inexpressible impatience I awaited my opponent. The spring sun rose, and it began to feel hot. I caught