

"SILVIO ! YOU KNEW SILVIO ?"

The Pistol Shot.

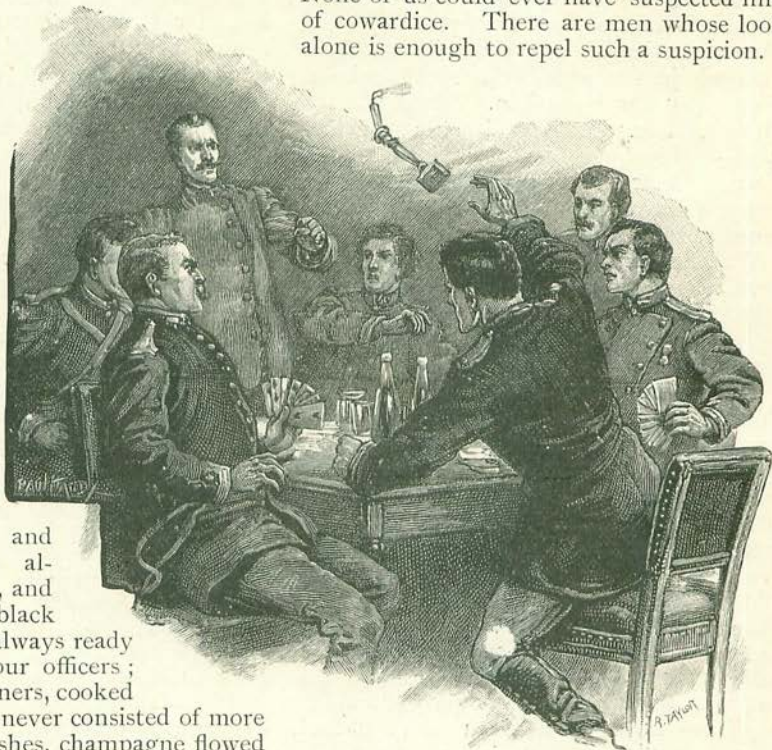
FROM THE RUSSIAN OF ALEXANDER PUSHKIN.



WE were stationed at the little village of Z. The life of an officer in the army is well known. Drill and the riding school in the morning; dinner with the colonel or at the Jewish restaurant; and in the evening punch and cards.

At Z. nobody kept open house, and there was no girl that anyone could think of marrying. We used to meet at each other's rooms, where we never saw anything but one another's uniforms. There was only one man among us who did not belong to the regiment. He was about thirty-five, and, of course, we looked upon him as an old fellow. He had the advantage of experience, and his habitual gloom, stern features, and his sharp tongue gave him great influence over his juniors. He was surrounded by a certain mystery. His looks were Russian, but his name was foreign. He had served in the Hussars, and with credit. No one knew what had induced him to retire and settle in this out of the way little village, where he lived in mingled poverty and extravagance. He always went on foot, and wore a shabby black coat. But he was always ready to receive any of our officers; and, though his dinners, cooked by a retired soldier, never consisted of more than two or three dishes, champagne flowed at them like water. His income or how he got it no one knew; and no one ventured to ask. He had a few books on military subjects and a few novels, which he willingly lent and never asked to have returned. But, on the other hand, he never returned the books he himself borrowed.

His principal recreation was pistol-shooting. The walls of his room were riddled with bullets—a perfect honeycomb. A rich collection of pistols was the only thing luxurious in his modestly furnished villa. His skill as a shot was quite prodigious. If he had undertaken to shoot a pear off some one's cap, not a man in our regiment would have hesitated to act as target. Our conversation often turned on duelling. Silvio—so I will call him—never joined in it. When asked if he had ever fought, he answered curtly, "Yes." But he gave no particulars, and it was evident that he disliked such questions. We concluded that the memory of some unhappy victim of his terrible skill preyed heavily upon his conscience. None of us could ever have suspected him of cowardice. There are men whose look alone is enough to repel such a suspicion.



"THE OFFICER SEIZED A BRASS CANDLESTICK."

An unexpected incident fairly astonished us. One afternoon about ten officers were dining with Silvio. They drank as usual; that is to say, a great deal. After dinner we asked our host to make a pool. For a

long time he refused on the ground that he seldom played. At last he ordered cards to be brought in. With half a hundred gold pieces on the table we sat round him, and the game began. It was Silvio's habit not to speak when playing. He never disputed or explained. If an adversary made a mistake Silvio without a word chalked it down against him. Knowing his way, we always let him have it.

But among us on this occasion was an officer who had but lately joined. While playing he absent-mindedly scored a point too much. Silvio took the chalk and corrected the score in his own fashion. The officer, supposing him to have made a mistake, began to explain. Silvio went on dealing in silence. The officer, losing patience, took the brush and rubbed out what he thought was wrong. Silvio took the chalk and recorrected it. The officer, heated with wine and play, and irritated by the laughter of the company, thought himself aggrieved, and, in a fit of passion, seized a brass candlestick and threw it at Silvio, who only just managed to avoid the missile. Great was our confusion. Silvio got up, white with rage, and said, with sparkling eyes—

"Sir! have the goodness to withdraw, and you may thank God that this has happened in my own house."

We could have no doubt as to the consequences, and we already looked upon our new comrade as a dead man. He withdrew saying that he was ready to give satisfaction for his offence in any way desired.

The game went on for a few minutes. But feeling that our host was upset we gradually left off playing and dispersed, each to his own quarters. At the riding school next day, we were already asking one another whether the young lieutenant was still alive, when he appeared among us. We asked him the same question, and were told that he had not yet heard from Silvio. We were astonished. We went to Silvio's and found him in the court-yard popping bullet after bullet into an ace which he had gummed to the gate. He received us as usual, but made no allusion to what had happened on the previous evening.

Three days passed, and the lieutenant was still alive. "Can it be possible," we asked one another in astonishment, "that Silvio will not fight?"

Silvio did not fight. He accepted a flimsy apology, and became reconciled to the man who had insulted him. This lowered him

greatly in the opinion of the young men, who, placing bravery above all the other human virtues and regarding it as an excuse for every imaginable vice, were ready to overlook anything sooner than a lack of courage. However, little by little all was forgotten, and Silvio regained his former influence. I alone could not renew my friendship with him. Being naturally romantic I had surpassed the rest in my attachment to the man whose life was an enigma, and who seemed to me a hero of some mysterious story. He liked me; and with me alone did he drop his sarcastic tone and converse simply and most agreeably on many subjects. But after this unlucky evening the thought that his honour was tarnished, and that it remained so by his own choice, never left me; and this prevented any renewal of our former intimacy. I was ashamed to look at him. Silvio was too sharp and experienced not to notice this and guess the reason. It seemed to vex him, for I observed that once or twice he hinted at an explanation. But I wanted none; and Silvio gave me up. Thenceforth I only met him in the presence of other friends, and our confidential talks were at an end.

The busy occupants of the capital have no idea of the emotions so frequently experienced by residents in the country and in country towns; as, for instance, in awaiting the arrival of the post. On Tuesdays and Fridays the bureau of the regimental staff was crammed with officers. Some were expecting money, others letters or newspapers. The letters were mostly opened on the spot, and the news freely interchanged, the office meanwhile presenting a most lively appearance.

Silvio's letters used to be addressed to our regiment, and he usually called for them himself. On one occasion, a letter having been handed to him, I saw him break the seal and, with a look of great impatience, read the contents. His eyes sparkled. The other officers, each engaged with his own letters, did not notice anything.

"Gentlemen," said Silvio, "circumstances demand my immediate departure. I leave to-night, and I hope you will not refuse to dine with me for the last time. I shall expect you, too," he added, turning towards me, "without fail." With these words he hurriedly left, and we agreed to meet at Silvio's.

I went to Silvio's at the appointed time, and found nearly the whole regiment with

him. His things were already packed. Nothing remained but the bare shot-marked walls. We sat down to table. The host was in excellent spirits, and his liveliness communicated itself to the rest of the company. Corks popped every moment. Bottles fizzed, and tumblers foamed incessantly, and we, with much warmth, wished our departing friend a pleasant journey and every happiness. The evening was far advanced when we rose from table. During the search for hats, Silvio wished everybody good-bye. Then, taking me by the hand, as I was on the point of leaving, he said in a low voice,

"I want to speak to you."

I stopped behind.

The guests had gone and we were left alone.

Sitting down opposite one another, we lighted our pipes. Silvio was much agitated; no traces of his former gaiety remained. Deadly pale, with sparkling eyes, and a thick smoke issuing from his mouth, he looked like a demon. Several minutes passed before he broke silence.

"Perhaps we shall never meet again," he said.

"Before saying good-bye I want to have a few words with you. You may have remarked that I care little for the opinions of others. But I like you, and should be sorry to leave you under a wrong impression."

He paused, and began refilling his pipe. I looked down and was silent.

"You thought it odd," he continued, "that I did not require satisfaction from that drunken maniac. You will grant, however, that being entitled to the choice of weapons I had his life more or less in my hands. I might attribute my tolerance to generosity, but I will not deceive

you. If I could have chastised him without the least risk to myself, without the slightest danger to my own life, then I would on no account have forgiven him."

I looked at Silvio with surprise. Such a confession completely upset me. Silvio continued:—

"Precisely so: I had no right to endanger my life. Six years ago I received a slap in the face, and my enemy still lives."

My curiosity was greatly excited.

"Did you not fight him?" I inquired.

"Circumstances probably separated you?"

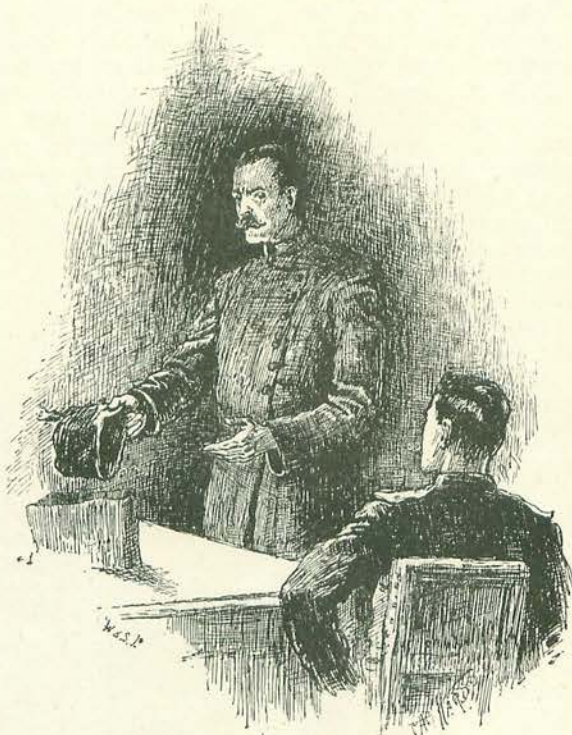
"I did fight him," replied Silvio, "and here is a memento of our duel."

He rose and took from a cardboard box a red cap with a gold tassel and gold braid.

"My disposition is well known to you. I have been accustomed to be first in everything. From my youth this has been my passion. In my time dissipation was the fashion, and I was the most dissipated man in the army. We used to boast of our drunkenness. I beat at drinking the celebrated Bourtoff, of whom Davidoff has sung in his

poems. Duels in our regiment were of daily occurrence. I took part in all of them, either as second or as principal. My comrades adored me, while the commanders of the regiment, who were constantly being changed, looked upon me as an incurable evil.

"I was calmly, or rather boisterously, enjoying my reputation, when a certain young man joined our regiment. He was rich, and came of a distinguished family—I will not name him. Never in my life did I meet with so brilliant, so fortunate a fellow!—young, clever, handsome, with the wildest



"HERE IS A MEMENTO OF OUR DUEL."

spirits, the most reckless bravery, bearing a celebrated name, possessing funds of which he did not know the amount, but which were inexhaustible. You may imagine the effect he was sure to produce among us. My leadership was shaken. Dazzled by my reputation, he began by seeking my friendship. But I received him coldly; at which, without the least sign of regret, he kept aloof from me.

"I took a dislike to him. His success in the regiment and in the society of women brought me to despair. I tried to pick a quarrel with him. To my epigrams he replied with epigrams which always seemed to me more pointed and more piercing than my own, and which were certainly much livelier; for while he joked, I was raving.

"Finally, at a ball at the house of a Polish landed proprietor, seeing him receive marked attention from all the ladies, and especially from the lady of the house, who had formerly been on very friendly terms with me, I whispered some low insult in his ear. He flew into a passion, and gave me a slap on the cheek. We clutched our swords; the ladies fainted; we were separated; and the same night we drove out to fight.

"It was nearly daybreak. I was standing at the appointed spot with my three seconds. How impatiently I awaited my opponent! The spring sun had risen, and it was growing hot. At last I saw him in the distance. He was on foot, accompanied by only one second. We advanced to meet him. He approached, holding in his hand his regimental cap, filled full of black cherries.

"The seconds measured twelve paces. It was for me to fire first. But my excitement was so great that I could not depend upon the certainty of my hand; and, in order to give myself time to get calm, I ceded the first shot to my adversary. He would not accept it, and we decided to cast lots.

"The number fell to him; constant favourite of fortune

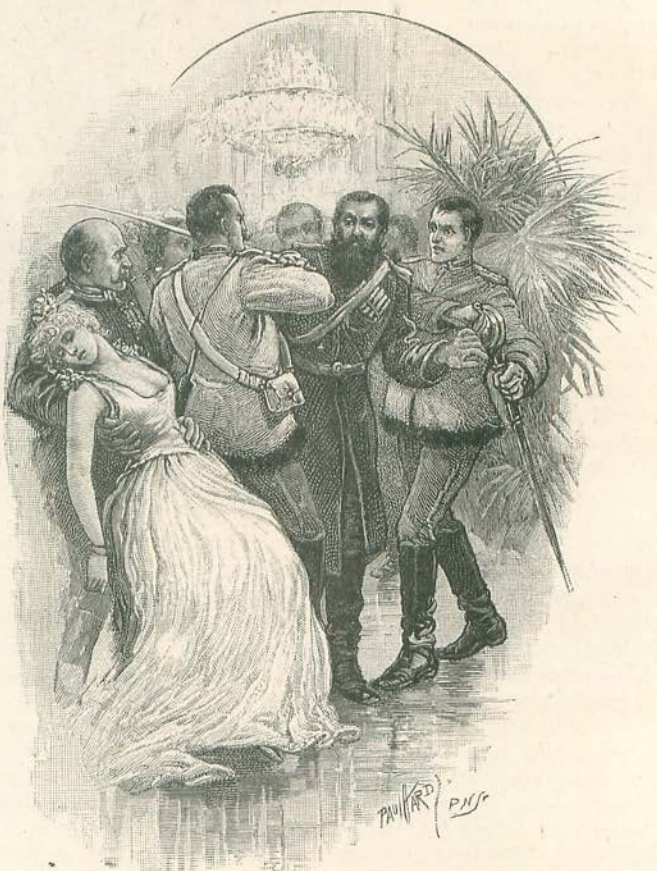
that he was! He aimed, and put a bullet through my cap.

"It was now my turn. His life at last was in my hands; I looked at him eagerly, trying to detect if only some faint shadow of uneasiness. But he stood beneath my pistol, picking out ripe cherries from his cap and spitting out the stones, some of which fell near me. His indifference enraged me. 'What is the use,' thought I, 'of depriving him of life, when he sets no value upon it.' As this savage thought flitted through my brain I lowered the pistol.

"'You don't seem to be ready for death,' I said; 'you are eating your breakfast, and I don't want to interfere with you.'

"'You don't interfere with me in the least,' he replied. 'Be good enough to fire. Or don't fire if you prefer it; the shot remains with you, and I shall be at your service at any moment.'

"I turned to the seconds, informing them that I had no intention of firing that day; and with this the duel ended. I resigned



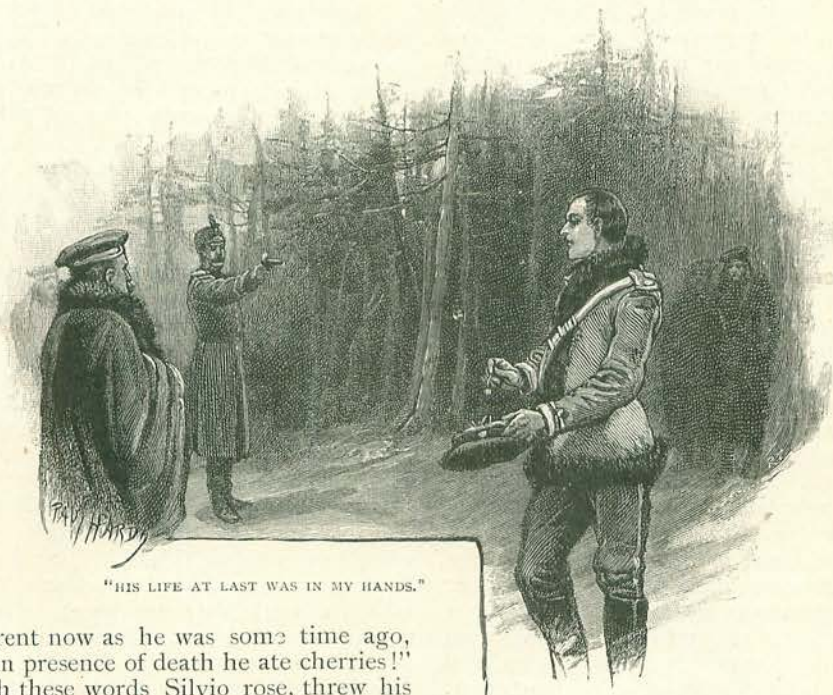
"WE CLUTCHED OUR SWORDS."

my commission and retired to this little place. Since then not a single day has passed that I have not thought of my revenge; and now the hour has arrived."

Silvio took from his pocket the letter he had received that morning, and handed it to me to read. Someone (it seemed to be his business agent) wrote to him from Moscow, that a certain individual was soon to be married to a young and beautiful girl.

"You guess," said Silvio, "who the certain individual is. I am starting for Moscow. We shall see whether he will be as

careless existence. Most difficult of all I found it to pass in solitude the spring and winter evenings. Until the dinner hour I somehow occupied the time, talking to the *starosta*, driving round to see how the work went on, or visiting the new buildings. But as soon as evening began to draw in, I was at a loss what to do with myself. My books in various bookcases, cupboards, and storerooms I knew by heart. The house-keeper, Kurilovna, related to me all the stories she could remember. The songs of the peasant women made me melancholy.



"HIS LIFE AT LAST WAS IN MY HANDS."

indifferent now as he was some time ago, when in presence of death he ate cherries!"

With these words Silvio rose, threw his cap upon the floor, and began pacing up and down the room like a tiger in his cage. I remained silent. Strange contending feelings agitated me.

The servant entered and announced that the horses were ready. Silvio grasped my hand tightly. He got into the *telega*, in which lay two trunks—one containing his pistols, the other some personal effects. We wished good-bye a second time, and the horses galloped off.

II.

MANY years passed, and family circumstances obliged me to settle in the poor little village of N. Engaged in farming, I sighed in secret for my former merry,

I tried cherry brandy, but that gave me the headache. I must confess, however, that I had some fear of becoming a drunkard from *ennui*, the saddest kind of drunkenness imaginable, of which I had seen many examples in our district.

I had no near neighbours with the exception of two or three melancholy ones, whose conversation consisted mostly of hiccups and sighs. Solitude was preferable to that. Finally I decided to go to bed as early as possible, and to dine as late as possible, thus shortening the evening and lengthening the day; and I found this plan a good one.

Four versts from my place was a large estate belonging to Count B.; but the

steward alone lived there. The Countess had visited her domain once only, just after her marriage; and she then only lived there about a month. However, in the second spring of my retirement, there was a report that the Countess, with her husband, would come to spend the summer on her estate; and they arrived at the beginning of June.

The advent of a rich neighbour is an important event for residents in the country. The landowners and the people of their household talk of it for a couple of months beforehand, and for three years afterwards. As far as I was concerned, I must confess, the expected arrival of a young and beautiful neighbour affected me strongly. I burned with impatience to see her; and the first Sunday after her arrival I started for the village, in order to present myself to the Count and Countess as their near neighbour and humble servant.

The footman showed me into the Count's study, while he went to inform him of my arrival. The spacious room was furnished in a most luxurious manner. Against the walls stood enclosed bookshelves well furnished with books, and surmounted by bronze busts. Over the marble mantel-piece was a large mirror. The floor was covered with green cloth, over which were spread rugs and carpets.

Having got unaccustomed to luxury in my own poor little corner, and not having beheld the wealth of other people for a long while, I was awed; and I awaited the Count with a sort of fear, just as a petitioner from the provinces awaits in an ante-room the arrival of the minister. The doors opened, and a man, about thirty-two, and very handsome, entered the apartment. The Count approached me with a frank and friendly look. I tried to be self-possessed, and began to introduce myself, but he forestalled me.

We sat down. His easy and agreeable conversation soon dissipated my nervous timidity. I was already passing into my usual manner, when suddenly the Countess entered, and I became more confused than ever. She was, indeed, beautiful. The Count presented me. I was anxious to appear at ease, but the more I tried to assume an air of unrestraint, the more awkward I felt myself becoming. They, in order to give me time to recover myself and get accustomed to my new acquaintances, conversed with one another, treating me in good neighbourly fashion without ceremony.

Meanwhile, I walked about the room, examining the books and pictures. In pictures I am no *connoisseur*; but one of the Count's attracted my particular notice. It represented a view in Switzerland. I was not, however, struck by the painting, but by the fact that it was shot through by two bullets, one planted just on the top of the other.

"A good shot," I remarked, turning to the Count.

"Yes," he replied, "a very remarkable shot."

"Do you shoot well?" he added.

"Tolerably," I answered, rejoicing that the conversation had turned at last on a subject which interested me. "At a distance of thirty paces I do not miss a card; I mean, of course, with a pistol that I am accustomed to."

"Really?" said the Countess, with a look of great interest. "And you, my dear, could you hit a card at thirty paces?"

"Some day," replied the Count, "we will try. In my own time I did not shoot badly. But it is four years now since I held a pistol in my hand."

"Oh," I replied, "in that case, I bet, Count, that you will not hit a card even at twenty paces. The pistol demands daily practice. I know that from experience. In our regiment I was reckoned one of the best shots. Once I happened not to take a pistol in hand for a whole month: I had sent my own to the gunsmith's. Well, what do you think, Count? The first time I began again to shoot I four times running missed a bottle at twenty paces. The captain of our company, who was a wit, happened to be present, and he said to me: 'Your hand, my friend, refuses to raise itself against the bottle!' No, Count, you must not neglect to practise, or you will soon lose all skill. The best shot I ever knew used to shoot every day, and at least three times every day before dinner. This was as much his habit as the preliminary glass of vodka."

The Count and Countess seemed pleased that I had begun to talk.

"And what sort of a shot was he?" asked the Count.

"This sort, Count: if he saw a fly settle on the wall— You smile, Countess, but I assure you it is a fact. When he saw the fly, he would call out, 'Kouska, my pistol!' Kouska brought him the loaded pistol. A crack, and the fly was crushed into the wall!"

"That is astonishing!" said the Count.
 "And what was his name?"

"Silvio was his name."

"Silvio!" exclaimed the Count, starting from his seat. "You knew Silvio?"

"How could I fail to know him?—we were comrades; he was received at our mess like a brother-officer. It is now about five years since I last had tidings of him. Then you, Count, also knew him?"

"I knew him very well. Did he never tell you of one very extraordinary incident in his life?"

"Do you mean the slap in the face, Count, that he received from a blackguard at a ball?"

"He did not tell you the name of this blackguard?"

"No, Count, he did not. Forgive me," I added, guessing the truth, "forgive me—I did not—could it really have been you?"

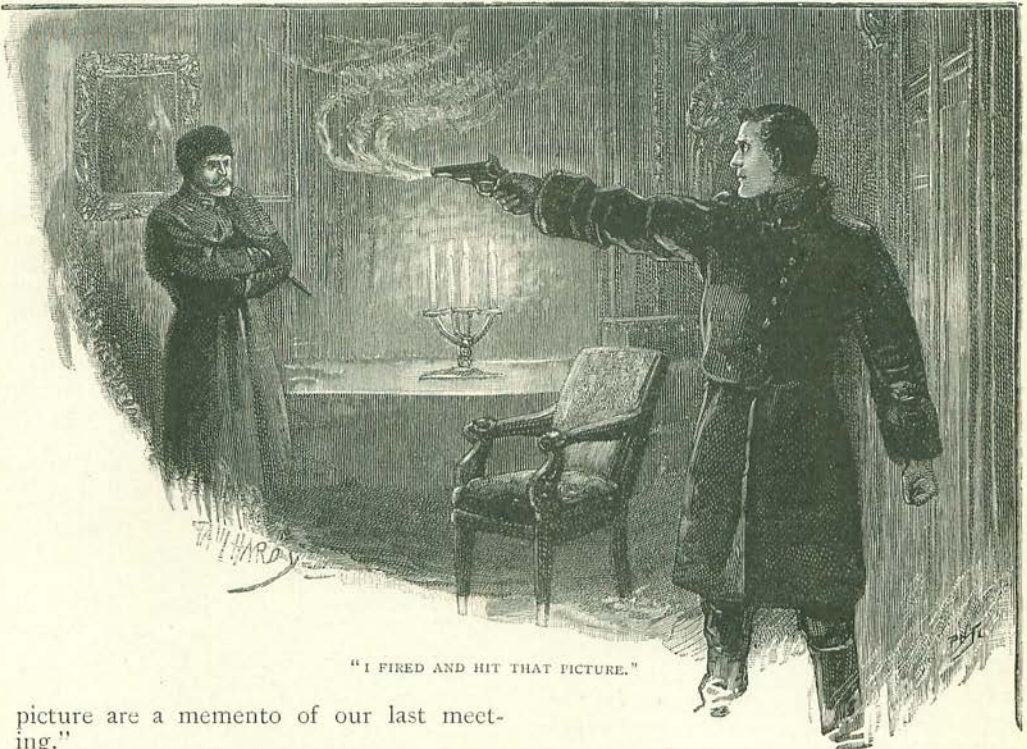
"It was myself," replied the Count, greatly agitated; "and the shots in the

friend. He shall also know how Silvio revenged himself." The Count pushed a chair towards me, and with the liveliest interest I listened to the following story:—

"Five years ago," began the Count, "I got married. The honeymoon I spent here, in this village. To this house I am indebted for the happiest moments of my life, and for one of its saddest remembrances.

"One afternoon we went out riding together. My wife's horse became restive. She was frightened, got off the horse, handed the reins over to me, and walked home. I rode on before her. In the yard I saw a travelling carriage, and I was told that in my study sat a man who would not give his name, but simply said that he wanted to see me on business. I entered the study, and saw in the darkness a man, dusty and unshaven. He stood there, by the fireplace. I approached him trying to recollect his face.

"You don't remember me, Count?" he said, in a tremulous voice.



"I FIRED AND HIT THAT PICTURE."

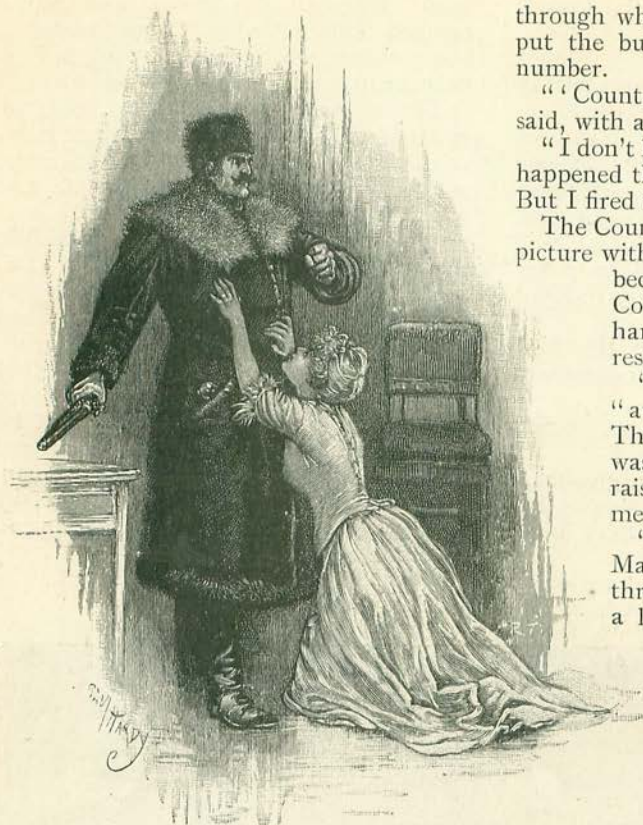
picture are a memento of our last meeting."

"Oh, my dear," said the Countess, "for God's sake, do not relate it! It frightens me to think of it."

"No," replied the Count; "I must tell him all. He knows how I insulted his

"Silvio!" I cried, and I confess, I felt that my hair was standing on end.

"Exactly so," he added. "You owe me a shot; I have come to claim it. Are



"MASHA THREW HERSELF AT HIS FEET."

you ready?' A pistol protruded from his side pocket.

"I measured twelve paces, and stood there in that corner, begging him to fire quickly, before my wife came in.

"He hesitated, and asked for a light. Candles were brought in. I locked the doors, gave orders that no one should enter, and again called upon him to fire. He took out his pistol and aimed.

"I counted the seconds. . . . I thought of her. . . . A terrible moment passed! Then Silvio lowered his hand.

"I only regret," he said, "that the pistol is not loaded with cherry-stones. My bullet is heavy; and it always seems to me that an affair of this kind is not a duet, but a murder. I am not accustomed to aim at unarmed men. Let us begin again from the beginning. Let us cast lots as to who shall fire first."

"My head went round. I think I objected. Finally, however, we loaded another pistol and rolled up two pieces of paper. These he placed inside his cap; the one

through which, at our first meeting, I had put the bullet. I again drew the lucky number.

"'Count, you have the devil's luck,' he said, with a smile which I shall never forget.

"I don't know what I was about, or how it happened that he succeeded in inducing me. But I fired and hit that picture."

The Count pointed with his finger to the picture with the shot-marks. His face had become red with agitation. The Countess was whiter than her own handkerchief: and I could not restrain an exclamation.

"I fired," continued the Count, "and, thank heaven, missed. Then Silvio—at this moment he was really terrible—then Silvio raised his pistol to take aim at me.

"Suddenly the door flew open, Masha rushed into the room. She threw herself upon my neck with a loud shriek. Her presence restored to me all my courage.

"My dear," I said to her, 'don't you see that we are only joking? How frightened you look! Go and drink a glass of water and then come back; I will introduce you to an old friend and comrade.'

"Masha was still in doubt. 'Tell me, is my husband speaking the truth?' she asked, turning to the terrible Silvio; 'is it true that you are only joking?'

"He is always joking, Countess," Silvio replied. 'He once in a joke gave me a slap in the face; in joke he put a bullet through this cap while I was wearing it; and in joke, too, he missed me when he fired just now. And now I have a fancy for a joke.' With these words he raised his pistol as if to shoot me down before her eyes!

"Masha threw herself at his feet.

"Rise, Masha! For shame!' I cried in my passion; 'and you, sir, cease to amuse yourself at the expense of an unhappy woman. Will you fire or not?'

"I will not," replied Silvio. 'I am satisfied. I have witnessed your agitation; your terror. I forced you to fire at me. That is enough; you will remember me. I leave you to your conscience.'

"He was now about to go. But he stopped at the door, looked round at the picture which my shot had passed through, fired at

it almost without taking aim, and disappeared.

"My wife had sunk down fainting. The servants had not ventured to stop Silvio, whom they looked upon with terror. He passed out to the steps, called his coachman, and before I could collect myself drove off."

The Count was silent. I had now heard the end of the story of which the beginning had long before surprised me. The hero of it I never saw again. I heard, however, that Silvio, during the rising of Alexander Ipsilanti, commanded a detachment of insurgents and was killed in action.

