The Queen of Spades

Alexander Pushkin · *1834 · T. Keane translation (1894)*

At a card party of young officers in St. Petersburg, a quiet engineer officer, Hermann, hears that an old Countess once learned a secret of three winning cards. He sets out to get it from her, using her ward Lizaveta Ivanovna as his means. Pushkin's short tale of gambling, greed, and a ghost is one of the great Russian stories.

THE CENTRAL QUESTION

What does it do to a man to want a fortune enough to risk everything for a secret?

Hermann is thrifty and calculating, and he is driven by a single idea. He pretends to love Lizaveta in order to enter the house, he frightens the Countess to death, and he is promised the cards by her ghost on conditions. In the end he plays three nights, and on the last he turns the wrong card. The story is quick and ironic, and it does not say whether the ghost was real or an effect of his mind.

KEY CHARACTERS

Hermann
An engineer officer of German descent, thrifty and obsessed.

the Countess Anna Fedorovna
An old noblewoman who holds the secret.

Lizaveta Ivanovna
Her ward, who is used by Hermann.

Tomsky
The Countess's grandson, who tells the story.

Chekalinsky
The banker at the last game.

Naroumoff
The host of the card party.

Grades 9–12
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01
The Card Party
CHAPTER I

At the rooms of Naroumoff, Tomsky tells the story of his grandmother, the Countess, and her three winning cards. Hermann, who does not gamble, is struck by it.

- Hermann says he cannot risk the necessary for the superfluous.
- The Countess's secret came from the Count of St. Germain.
- Hermann cannot stop thinking about it.

02
The Countess and Her Ward
CHAPTER II

The old Countess is described, with her ward Lizaveta Ivanovna. Hermann resolves to learn the secret.

- The Countess is a relic of another age.
- Lizaveta is poor and lonely.
- Hermann sees a way in.

03
Hermann and Lizaveta
CHAPTERS III–IV

Hermann writes to Lizaveta, wins her trust, and obtains a way into the house by the secret stair.

- His love letters are copied from a German novel.
- Lizaveta believes him.
- The stair is the way into the plot.

04
The Night Visit
CHAPTERS IV–V

Hermann hides in the house and confronts the Countess, who dies of fright. Lizaveta calls him a monster.

- He demands the secret by threat.
- The Countess dies without speaking.
- Lizaveta sees him at last.

05
The Funeral and the Ghost
CHAPTER V

At the funeral Hermann thinks the corpse winks at him. The Countess's ghost gives him the three cards on conditions.

- The funeral is both solemn and strange.
- The ghost's conditions are specific.
- Hermann's mind is fixed on the cards.

06
The Three Nights
CHAPTER VI

Hermann wins on two nights and on the third turns the wrong card, the queen of spades. He loses all and goes out of his mind.

- The first two wins seem to prove the secret.
- The third card is a shock.
- The ending is a madhouse and a fixed idea.

Greed | Fate | The Supernatural | Obsession

What to watch for as you read

GRADES 9–12

1. Notice how Hermann is described. Is he a villain or a victim?
2. The story is told with a light, cool touch. Watch for irony.
3. The ghost may be real or not. Look for clues either way.
4. Compare the three cards with the three nights of play.

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