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TOO GLOOMY FOR PRIVATE PUSHKIN

BY RICHARD DEMING

ILLUSTRATED BY FREAS

Private Pushkin had never seen a ghost, but he knew he could see one. All his family was gifted that way. Yet being able to sense such things didn't make him any fonder of them!

The patrol approached the castle warily, employing what army field manuals coyly refer to as the buddy system. Working in two teams of two each, they advanced in short dashes from bush to bush, only one member of each pair being in motion at any given moment. The other, covering for his partner, crouched motionless, his eyes probing possible places of enemy concealment and his trigger finger ready to spray bullets at the first sign of an enemy presence. After each dash across open space the respective roles of the partners reversed.

"Hold it a minute," Sergeant Spoda whispered without look-

ing around, when a soggy splash to his immediate rear informed him Private Pushkin had just completed his latest advance.

When the patrol had first spied the castle, at a distance through drizzling rain which obscured its decrepitness and made it seem majestic and somehow formidable, Sergeant Spoda had taken for granted it was occupied, for Italy was studded with medieval castles converted to summer estates. And apparently Lieutenant Grant had agreed with him or he would never have ordered such a stealthy approach. But now the sergeant was near enough to detect great gaps in the encircling wall, and through



one of the gaps could be seen a huge pile of broken stone, where part of a tower had fallen.

"It's deserted, for crise-sakes," Spoda said disgustedly. "We been crawling through muck for a ruin." Raising himself on one elbow, he peered back at his fat companion. "Can you see Bisby and Lieutenant Grant?"

"I heard them a minute ago. About fifty yards left, I think."

"Oh fine!" the sergeant said bitterly. "If I yell for instructions, I'll get ate out for making noise. And if we stand up and walk the rest of the way to meet him at the drawbridge, instead of crawling to the goddam thing, he'll have my hide for ignoring orders." He eyed the castle broodingly. "By now the sonovagun knows it's a deserted wreck as well as we do, but you think he'll walk over and say so? He'll wait till we crawl the last fifty yards, then stroll over and make some crack about being scared of empty buildings."

"Why don't we just wait here?" Pushkin asked hopefully.

"Because the lieutenant said crawl, stupid. When you been in this outfit as long as me, you'll crawl when Lieutenant Grant says crawl, or wish you'd never been born."

Their last spurt had carried them to within thirty yards of

the moat, which heavily edged by scrubs. Screened from possible observation by anything that might be in the castle, now they could wriggle on their stomachs from bush to bush instead of having to dash across open areas. Resignedly the sergeant began to crawl.

"Come on," he ordered.

"Listen," Private Pushkin whispered. "Even if nobody lives there, it could be a Kraut observation post, couldn't it?"

Without stopping his wriggling motion, Spoda said, "To observe what? A couple of bare mountains? You can't see our lines from here."

Then both men instinctively pressed flat as the short scream of an eighty-eight—too short to give proper warning—ended in an air burst a hundred yards to their right. Immediately another exploded on the far side of the castle.

"Interdiction fire," Sergeant Spoda muttered. "Popping at nothing." He scowled back at the fat private. "That answer your question? The Krauts ain't in the habit of shelling their own OP's."

Again he cautiously began to move forward, but stopped to glance an irritated inquiry at his companion when the latter failed to follow.

"I don't like the looks of that

castle," said Private Pushkin. "It's awfully gloomy-looking."

"For crisesakes!" The sergeant's tone took on a sarcastic edge. "We'll send a letter in triplicate to Eisenhower complaining the castles in this god-damed war is too gloomy for Private Pushkin. What the hell you want? Jack-o-lanterns over the drawbridge?"

"I mean it looks . . . well . . . haunted."

Sergeant Spoda emitted a snort. "Three divisions of Krauts within five miles of here, and you got to worry about haunts!"

"Well, there are such things," Pushkin said defensively.

"You ever see one?"

"A haunt? Well . . . not exactly."

"Not exactly," the sergeant repeated sarcastically. "You ever see one approximately?"

The fat private said in a petulant voice, "You can laugh if you want. But I've talked to people who saw haunts. My father saw one once. He was raised in the old country and knows all about haunts."

A mild razzberry indicated what Sergeant Spoda thought of his companion's father. "I never seen one yet, and never expect to."

"You won't," Pushkin assured him. "My father says only peo-

ple who believe in haunts can see them."

Sergeant Spoda resumed crawling. "Personally I'd rather meet haunts in that castle than Krauts. And I'd rather meet both together than get to the drawbridge after the lieutenant does. Get the lead out."

Breathing hoarsely, Private Pushkin began to wriggle in the sergeant's wake.

When they reached the edge of the moat at a point about twenty yards from the drawbridge, Spoda again called a halt. Resting on his elbows, he pushed up his helmet to wipe muddy sweat from his eyes with a khaki sleeve, and craned his neck to peer at the point he expected Lieutenant Grant and Corporal Bisby to show. He was gratified to see a netted helmet at the edge of the moat equi-distant beyond the drawbridge to his own position. Apparently he and Pushkin were on schedule.

Motioning Pushkin forward, he crawled the remaining distance to the drawbridge, which he could now see permanently spanned the moat, for the heavy twin chains which once raised it lay rusted and broken in the center of the bridge. Still lying flat, Spoda dubiously eyed the huge stone arch forming the entrance to the castle, in which rotting

wooden doors gaped wide in gloomy invitation. An aversion for the place sympathetic to that of Private Pushkin's touched him momentarily, and for once he was glad to await the lieutenant's instructions.

Lieutenant Grant, a thin, bitter-eyed young man of rawhide and muscle, rose from his own place of concealment, sauntered to the corner of the bridge opposite Spoda and sank to a squat behind a low bush. Like a tame shadow Corporal Bisby followed.

"What's the matter, Sergeant?" the lieutenant inquired with mock partonage. "Scared of empty houses?"

"No sir." Sergeant Spoda rose to his knees. "Didn't know it was empty."

"Heard the air-bursts, didn't you?" Lieutenant Grant asked in a sharp tone which did not quite cover his sadistic pleasure in getting under the sergeant's skin. "They wouldn't shell their own position."

As though bent on emphasizing the lieutenant's point, a series of short screams followed by dull explosions split the air. Left, right, behind them, air-bursts rained jagged metal on the ground.

With his cheek pressed into the mud, mechanically Spoda counted the bursts. Five . . . eight . . . twelve. A pause, then

. . . five . . . eight . . . eleven this time.

"Inside, before they throw another salvo," Lieutenant Grant called crisply.

Immediately Sergeant Spoda was on his knees again. "That means you, stupid," he growled at Pushkin, motioning the fat private to his feet. "Scram, and I'll cover."

With his left hand he whacked Pushkin on the seat of the pants as he lumbered by, then trained his tommygun on the doorway until it swallowed the fat private.

Then he was on his feet, racing across the rotting timbers of the bridge himself. Vaguely he was conscious of the lieutenant and the corporal coming erect behind him.

Belatedly the twelfth shell of the second salvo arrived just as Spoda reached the archway. High over the bridge it exploded, perhaps fifty yards in the air. A poor air-burst.

As he dived head-first between the gaping doors, Spoda felt a shell fragment clink against his helmet. On his stomach he slid across dusty flag-stone, bounced to his feet and swung his tommygun in a menacing arc at nothing but Private Pushkin.

They were in a large, oak-beamed and narrow-windowed

room containing a single crude wooden bench and one table. Great open fireplaces, in one of which hung an ancient cooking pot, yawned at either end of the room, and directly opposite the entrance was a doorless arch leading into the interior of the castle. Pushkin crouched in this, his back to the sergeant, leveling his rifle at the gloom of the next room.

His quick leap erect caused a wave of giddiness to sweep over Spoda, momentarily making his body seem light and weightless. He shook his head, then missing the lieutenant and Corporal Bisby, glanced back at the entrance. Shrouded in shadow, half in and half out of the doorway sprawled a khaki-clad figure. The helmet had rolled clear, and from the distance of a half-dozen paces the sergeant could see that too little remained of the head to make first aid anything but a waste of time.

Slightly sickened, he avoided going any closer to the body, choosing one of the high, narrow windows for observation rather than using the door. From it he saw racing away through the underbrush the stocky figure of Corporal Bisby. As he watched, the corporal threw away his rifle and disappeared in a burst of speed.

"Blew his top," Sergeant

Spoda muttered disgustedly. "Thought he was beginning to look fishy around the eyes."

When he turned, Pushkin was looking askance at the motionless figure in the doorway. "Bisby or Lieutenant Grant?" he asked huskily.

"The lieutenant. Bisby just blew his lid and took off like a scared rabbit."

Spoda advanced to peer into the dimness beyond Pushkin. For some reason he felt uncomfortable. Light and almost giddy-minded. Unwilling to attribute the feeling to the gloom of the surroundings, now intensified by the corpse in the doorway, he blamed it on the shell fragment which had dented his helmet. At the same time he was guiltily aware that his head did not ache, as it almost certainly would had the blow been sufficient to cause his peculiar feeling.

"There's something funny about this place," Pushkin said uneasily. "Do you feel sort of . . . well . . . strange?"

With unnecessary loudness the sergeant said, "No!" He summoned a sardonic smile and added, "Let's case the joint for haunts."

"My God!" Pushkin said. "You don't think there really are any, do you?"

Spoda frowned at him irritably. "There sure ain't any

Krauts here, or we'd be keeping the lieutenant company by now."

Striding into the next room, he found it even larger than the first. Apparently used by the original occupants as a banquet hall, long rough-hewn tables ringed the center, and above them hung massive iron candelabra. As in the first room cobwebs sagged from the ceiling and a thick layer of dust covered everything, testifying to the number of years since any living person had set foot in the hall.

Behind him Pushkin complained, "You might have warned me about the cobwebs in the doorway. They're all over me." Pettishly he brushed at his muddy uniform.

"Didn't notice them. What's a few cobwebs on top of all that mud anyway?"

Opposite the doorway by which they had entered was a similar arch leading still farther into the castle, and on either side of the room was another arch. Through these latter could be seen stone stairways leading upward.

"Those stairs must lead to the towers," Spoda said. "Let's start by checking the left one, since it's still in one piece. You noticed from outside the right tower was half caved in, didn't you? In real bad shape."

"Yeah. Maybe the other one's getting ready to cave in too. Let's get out of the joint and leave it to the haunts."

With his hand on the stone balustrade, Sergeant Spoda glared over his shoulder. "Will you get your mind off haunts? There ain't no such animal."

"I got a funny feeling about this place," Pushkin insisted. "There's a feeling in the air. Let's get out of here."

The sergeant turned to face his fat companion, slung his tommygun and placed both hands on hips.

"Listen, stupid," he said distinctly. "Ghosts and goblins and haunts is for kids—like Santa Claus. What you feel in the air is the goddam never-ending winter rain. Now shut up about haunts."

Doing an about face, he unslung his gun from his shoulder and poked it ahead as he began to mount the stairs. After a dozen steps they turned sharply right, then began to spiral.

At the second spiral Pushkin said, "Wait a minute, Sarge."

Spoda stopped his upward advance. "Now what?"

"I got that feeling stronger. There's something here that's not natural."

"Oh, for crisesakes!"

"I can tell," Pushkin said stubbornly. "I'm sensitive to

that kind of thing. My dad told me all my family is."

"Well, I don't feel nothing."

"You wouldn't, Sarge. I told you you can't see haunts unless you really believe in them."

Sergeant Spoda's expression became mildly exasperated. "You seen any haunts here, stupid?"

Dumbly, the fat private shook his head.

"Then there ain't any!" Spoda yelled. "You said yourself you'd see them if there was."

Pushkin's voice remained stubborn. "I can feel them. That's almost the same thing. I know something's here. Please, Sarge. Let's get out of here."

The sergeant's eyes narrowed in studied imitation of Lieutenant Grant. "One more crack about haunts, Pushkin, and I'll clip you right between the horns with a gun barrel, so help me! Now shut up while we case this joint!"

The fat private shut up, and for the next half hour followed Spoda stoically as they covered every inch of the castle, apparently deciding the remote possibility of encountering a haunt was less dangerous than the certainty of the sergeant's wrath if aroused any further. The exploration should have caused Pushkin's trepidation to subside, for they searched every nook and cranny of the rambling edifice

without uncovering any evidence of either German or supernatural occupation. But strangely, his uneasiness seemed to grow, for he was trembling violently by the time they returned to the room they had first entered.

"Satisfied the place is hauntless now?" Sergeant Spoda asked with an air of triumph.

"No," Pushkin said in a cracked voice. "I get the feeling stronger all the time. Let's get out of here before something awful happens."

"The feeling is stronger because it's getting darker," Spoda said impatiently. "You just got an overworked imagination."

"Maybe dark is when they begin to appear," Pushkin said miserably.

He flicked fearful eyes at the doorway, which was now so shrouded in shadow only the dim outline of the corpse could be seen.

Sardonically Spoda suggested, "Maybe it's the lieutenant's ghost you feel."

Then the sergeant's mouth slowly gaped open, for out from the shadow near the corpse stepped the figure of Lieutenant Grant.

As the lieutenant purposefully approached them, Sergeant Spoda felt a return of the light-headed giddiness he had expe-

rienced when first entering the castle: Wildly he looked at Pushkin, who gazed bug-eyed at the apparition.

"You see it too," Spoda muttered huskily, backing until the lone wooden bench separated him from the lieutenant.

"What are you looking so pop-eyed about, Pushkin?" snapped Lieutenant Grant.

Pushkin simply closed his eyes.

"Listen, Lieutenant," Spoda said in a voice which sounded hollow to his ears. "You're real, ain't you?"

Ignoring him, Lieutenant Grant continued to glare puzzledly at Pushkin.

With caution Spoda sidled around the bench, reached out an exploratory finger and prodded the lieutenant's shoulder. It felt reassuringly solid.

"Geeze, Lieutenant," he said. "For a minute you scared my pants off. I thought you was a ghost."

He might have been talking to empty space, for Lieutenant Grant gave no indication of having either heard or seen him. Instead he was shaking Pushkin by both arms.

"Snap out of it, soldier!" he said tartly, and when Pushkin opened his eyes to gape at him, "You cracking up like Bisby?"

Impatiently the lieutenant glanced around the rapidly dark-

ening room. "You explore the whole building, Pushkin?"

"Yes sir," Pushkin managed weakly.

"Sorry I left you alone so long. Chased that damn Bisby halfway back to our lines." He frowned suddenly. "Too bad about Spoda. He was a good man."

An onslaught of giddiness again hit the sergeant, for all at once he remembered the sprawled body in the doorway. Quickly he crossed to it, knelt and stared down with a strange tautness in his throat.

On the sleeve of each outstretched arm was sewn the insignia of a sergeant.

Rising numbly, he began to walk back toward the lieutenant and Pushkin.

"We can't very well carry him clear back to the lines," the lieutenant was saying. "Guess we better just clip one dog tag and report the location to Graves Registration."

He turned and strode briskly toward the body. Rooted to the floor, Spoda stood spread-legged exactly in the lieutenant's path.

Without faltering, Lieutenant Grant walked *directly through him*.

Sergeant Spoda stared at Private Pushkin, and the expression of horror on the fat private's face duplicated that on his own.