

Protection:

A Christmas Story

By Valery Brussov

Colonel R. told me this story. We were staying together at the estate of our mutual relatives, the M's. It was Christmas-time, and in the drawing-room one evening the talk turned on ghosts. The Colonel took no part in the conversation, but when we were alone together—we slept in the same room—he told me the following story.

This happened five-and-twenty years ago, and more: it was in the middle of the seventies. I had only just got my commission. Our regiment was stationed at *, a small provincial town in the government of X. We spent our time as officers usually do: we drank, played cards, and paid attentions to women.

Among the people living in the neighbourhood, one stood out above the rest, Mme. C— Elena Grigorievna. Strictly speaking, she did not belong to the society there, for until lately she had always lived at Petersburg. But being left a widow a year previously she had settled down to live on her country estate, about ten versts from the town. She was somewhat over thirty years of age, but in her eyes, almost unnaturally large, there was something childlike, which gave her an inexplicable charm. All our officers were attracted by her; but I fell in love with her, as only twenty can fall in love.

The commander of our company was a relative of Elena Grigorievna, and we obtained access to her house. She had become somewhat tired of being a recluse, and liked to have visits from young folks, though she lived almost alone. We sometimes went to dinner, and spent whole evenings there. But she behaved with so much tact and goodness that no one could boast of the slightest intimacy with her. Even malicious provincial tongues could bring no gossip against her.

I was sick of love for her. What tortured me more than all was the impossibility of frankly confessing my love. I would have done anything in the world just to fall on my knees before Elena Grigorievna and say aloud to her: "I love you." Youth is a little like intoxication. For the sake of having half an hour alone with her whom I loved, I resolved on a desperate measure. There was much snow that winter. In the Christmas holidays there was not a day but the wind raised the dry snow from the ground into the air in whirling eddies. I chose an evening when the weather was particularly bad, ordered my horse to be saddled, and set out over the fields.

I don't know how it was I didn't perish by the way. Everywhere the snow was whirling and the air was so thick with it that at two paces from me there stood, as it were, grey walls of snow. On the road the snow was almost up to one's knees. Twenty times I lost my way. Twenty times my horse refused to go further. I had a flask of cognac with me, and but for it I should have frozen. It took me just on three hours to travel the ten versts.

By some sort of miracle I arrived at the house. It was already late, and I hardly succeeded in knocking up the servants. When the watchman recognised me he exclaimed in wonder. I was all over snow, covered with ice, and looked like a Christmas mummer. Of course I had prepared a story to account for my appearance. My calculations were not at fault. Elena Grigorievna was obliged to receive me and she ordered a room to be prepared for me to stay the night.

In half an hour's time I was seated in the dining-room, alone with her. She pressed me to have supper, wine, tea. The logs crackled on the open fire, the light of a hanging-lamp enclosed us in a

circle which to me seemed magical. I felt not the slightest tiredness and was more in love than ever.

I was young, handsome, and certainly no fool. I had every right to the notice of a woman. But Elena Grigorievna, with unusual dexterity, evaded all talk of love. She compelled me to talk to her exactly as if we had been at a party in the midst of many other people. She laughed at my witticisms, but pretended not to understand any of my hints.

In spite of this, a special kind of intimacy sprang up between us, allowing us to speak more openly. And at length, knowing that it was nearly time to say good-night, I made up my mind. My consciousness, as it were, reminded me that such a suitable occasion would not repeat itself. "If you don't take advantage of today," said I to myself, "you have only yourself to blame." By a great effort of will, I suddenly broke off the conversation in the middle of a word, and in a moment, somewhat incoherently and awkwardly, I said out all that had been hidden in my soul.

"Why are we pretending, Elena Grigorievna? You know very well why I came to-day. I came to tell you that I love you. And now I say it to you. I cannot but love you and I want you to love me. Drive me away and I will humbly depart. If you don't tell me to go I shall take it as a sign that you love me. I don't want anything in between. I want either your anger or your love."

The childlike eyes of Elena Grigorievna became cold. They looked like crystal. I read such a clear answer in her countenance that I got up without another word and wanted to go off straight away. But she stopped me.

"That's enough! Where are you going? Don't behave like a little boy. Sit down."

She made me sit down near her and began to speak to me as if she had been an elder sister talking to a wayward child.

"You are too young yet, and love is something new to you. If another woman were in my place you would fall in love with her. In a month's time you would begin to love a third. But there is another kind of love which drains the depths of the soul. Such a love I had for Sergey, my husband, who is dead. I have given to him all I can ever feel. However much you may speak to me of love, I shall hear you no more than if I were dead. You must understand that I have no longer any capacity to attach any meaning to such words. It's just as if you spoke to someone who could not hear you. Reconcile yourself to this. You can no more be offended than if you were unable to make a dead woman love you."

Elena Grigorievna spoke with a slight smile. This appeared to me to be almost insulting. I imagined that she was laughing at me, in thus putting forward her own love for her dead husband. I felt myself grow pale. I remember the tears springing to my eyes.

My agitation was not unobserved by Elena Grigorievna. I saw the expression of her cold eyes begin to change. She understood that I was suffering. Restraining me with her hand, as she saw I wanted to get up without replying, she drew her chair nearer mine. I felt her breath on my face. Then lowering her voice, although we were alone in the room, she said to me, with a real frankness and tender intimacy:

"Forgive me, if I've offended you. Perhaps I am mistaken about your feeling, and it's more serious than I thought. So I will tell you the whole truth. Listen. My love for Sergey is not dead, but living. I love him, not for the past, but in the present. I am not separated from him. I take your confession to me seriously; take mine in the same way. From the very day of his death, Sergey began to show himself to me, invisibly but clearly. I am conscious of his nearness, I feel his breath, I hear his caressing whisper. I answer him and I have quiet talks with him. At times he almost openly kisses me, on my hair, my cheeks, my lips. At times I see his reflection dimly in the half-light, in a mirror. As soon as I am alone, he at once shows himself to me. I am

accustomed to this life with a shadow. I go on loving Sergey in this other form of his, just as passionately and tenderly as I loved him before. I want no other love. And I will not break faith with the man who has not left me, even though he has passed beyond the bounds of this life. If you tell me that I rave, that I have an hallucination, I shall answer that it makes no difference to me what you think. I am happy in my love, why should I refuse my happiness? Let me be happy.”

Elena Grigorievna spoke this long speech of hers gently, without raising her voice, and with deep conviction. I was so impressed by her earnestness that I could find no answer. I looked at her with a certain awe and pity, as at someone whom grief had crazed. But she had become the hostess again and spoke now in another tone, as if all she had said previously might have been a joke:

“Well, it’s time for us to go to bed. Matthew will show you your bedroom.”

Matthew was an old servant of the house. I mechanically kissed the hand she held out to me. And in another minute Matthew was asking me, in a lugubrious voice, to follow him. He led me to the other side of the house, showed me the bed which had been prepared for me, wished me good night, and left me.

Only then did I recover myself a little. And, isn’t it strange, my first feeling was that of shame? I felt ashamed at having played such an unenviable role. I felt ashamed to think that though I had been alone for two hours with a young woman, in an almost empty house, I hadn’t even got so far as to kiss her lips. At that moment I felt more malice than love towards Elena Grigorievna and a wish to revenge myself upon her. I had ceased to think that her mind might be unhinged, I thought she had been making fun of me.

Sitting down on my bed, I began to think matters over. I was familiar with the house. I knew that I was in the dead Sergey Dmitrievitch’s study. The room next was his bedroom, where everything was left exactly as in his lifetime. On the wall in front of me hung his portrait in oils. He was in a black coat and was wearing the ribbon of the French Order of the Legion of Honour, which he had received—I don’t know how or why—in the time of the Second Empire. And by some sort of strange connection of ideas, it was this ribbon specially which gave me the idea of the strangest, wildest plan.

My face was not unlike that of the dead Sergey Dmitrievitch. Of course he was older than I. But we both wore a moustache and did our hair alike. Only his hair was grey. I went into his bedroom. The wardrobe was unlocked. I looked for the black coat of the portrait and put it on. I found the ribbon of the Order. I powdered my hair and my moustache. In a word, I dressed myself up as the dead man.

Probably if my design had been successful I should be ashamed to tell you about it. I confess that what I planned was much worse than a simple joke. It would have been absolutely unpardonable had I not been so young. But I received the due reward of my action.

Having finished the change of my attire, I directed my steps towards Elena Grigorievna’s bedroom. Have you ever chanced to creep along at night in a sleeping house? How distinct is every rustle, how terribly loud is the creak of every floor-board in the silence! Several times it seemed to me that I should arouse all the servants.

At length I gained the wished-for door. My heart beat. I turned the handle. The door opened noiselessly. I went in. The room was lighted by a lamp, which was burning brightly. Elena Grigorievna had not yet gone to bed. She was seated in a large armchair in her dressing-gown, in front of a table, deep in thought, in remembrance. She had not heard me come in.

I stood for some minutes in the half-shadow, not daring to take a step forward. Suddenly, Elena Grigorievna, becoming conscious of my presence, or hearing some sort of noise, turned her head. She saw me and began to tremble. My stratagem had succeeded better than I might have expected. She took me for her dead husband. Getting up from the armchair with a faint cry she stretched out her arms to me. I heard her voice of joy:

“Sergey! It is you! At last!”

And then, all trembling with agitation, she sank down again, seemingly unconscious, into her chair.

Not fully aware of what I wanted to do, I ran towards her. But the instant I came close to the armchair I saw before me the form of another man. This was so unexpected that I stood still, as if the rigour of death had overtaken me. Afterwards I reflected that a large mirror must have stood there. This other man was a perfect replica of myself. He too wore a black coat; on his breast he too wore the ribbon of the Legion of Honour. And in a moment I understood that this was he whose form I had stolen, he who had come from beyond the grave to protect his wife. A sharp tenor ran through all my limbs.

For several seconds we stood facing one another by the chair in which lay unconscious the woman for whom we were striving. I was unable to make the slightest movement. And he, this phantom, quietly raised his hand and made a threatening gesture towards me.

I took part afterwards in the Turkish War. I have looked on death and have seen all that would be counted terrible. But I have never again experienced such horror as then overcame me. This threat from the other world stopped the beating of my heart and the flow of blood in my veins. For a moment I almost became a corpse myself. Then without another glance, I rushed to the door.

Holding on by the walls, staggering along, not caring how loudly my steps resounded I reached my own room. I had not sufficient courage to look at the portrait hanging on the wall. I threw myself flat on the bed, and a sort of black stupor held me fast there.

I wakened at dawn. I was still wearing the same false attire. In an agony of shame I took it off and hung it up in its place. Dressing myself in my own uniform, I went to find Matthew, and told him I must leave at once. He was evidently not in the least surprised. I asked the housemaid Glasha if her mistress were still asleep, and got the answer that she was sleeping peacefully. This cheered me. I begged her to say that I apologised for leaving without saying good~bye and galloped off.

A few days later I went with some friends to visit Elena Grigorievna. She received me with her usual courtesy. Not by a single hint did she remind me of that night. And to this day, it is a mystery to me; did she or did she not understand what happened?