

## THE POET PUSHKIN.

BY THE EDITOR.

RUSSIA can scarcely claim to rank with the other European nations in science, art and literature, but on careful consideration we must after all grant to her a certain prominence, and characteristics peculiarly her own in the fields of intellectual and artistic endeavor. There are great scientists of Russian blood who have distinguished themselves by a boldness of hypothesis and sureness of imagination almost unrivaled among the nations of western Europe. Though we do not meet with them frequently, still there have been Mendelejeffs and Metchnikoffs, and we must recognize with gratitude the work they have done.

Perhaps the Russian type shows most distinctly in music, painting and poetry. Russian music may lack the logical clearness of a Beethoven and the orderly beauty of a Mozart, but their composers possess fervor, sentiment, or rather sentimentality, and we might say a combination of northern wildness and Oriental languor. Russia is still in the beginnings of her history, and she may in time make revelations in art and verse. What products of her genius we now have show sufficient originality to augur well for a future characteristically Russian art. We will here briefly review the accomplishments of one of Russia's most prominent poets, one who may be regarded as typically Russian.

Alexander Sergeyeveitch Pushkin was born May 26, 1799. He was descended from an old Russian noble family, but, strange to say, on his mother's side there was African blood in his veins, from his great-grandfather, General Abraham Hannibal, whom Peter the Great had bought when a child. His royal master gave Hannibal a good education, so that, with all the benefits of his master's confidence, he was enabled to enter the government service and rise to the position of general.

The features of Pushkin still showed some indications of his

southern progenitor, in the shape of his chin and forehead, perhaps also in his crisp hair. But should we not consider that Hannibal may possibly have been a Nubian or Lybian, rather than a negro? In that case it is quite possible that Pushkin is more closely related to the story-tellers of *Arabian Nights* than to Uncle Remus.

Pushkin entered life under exceptionally favorable circumstances. Born of rich parents, he grew up in the highest circles of the aristocracy. He received a good education, especially in modern languages,—French, Italian and English. At any rate he allowed himself to be influenced by Lord Byron who best suited his Russian *Weltschmerz*. A description of his own personality is still extant in French verse which reads thus :

“Vous me demandez mon portrait,  
Mais peint d’après nature ;  
Mon cher, il sera bientôt fait,  
Quoique en miniature.

“Je suis un jeune polisson  
Encore dans les classes ;  
Point sot : je le dis sans façon,  
Et sans fades grimaces.

“Onc il ne fut de babillard,  
Ni docteur en Sorbonne,—  
Plus ennuyeux et plus braillard  
Que moi-même en personne.

“Ma taille à celle des plus longs  
Ne peut être égalée ;  
J’ai le teint frais, les cheveux blonds  
Et la tête bouclée.

“J’aime le monde et son fracas,  
Je hais la solitude ;  
J’abhorre et noises et débats,  
Et tant soit peu l’étude.

“Spectacles, bals me plaisent fort,  
Et d’après ma pensée.  
Je dirais ce que j’aime encore . . .  
Si je n’étais au lycée.

“Après, mon cher, il te suffit,  
L’on peut me reconnaître.  
Oui ! tel que le bon Dieu me fit,  
Je veux toujours paraître.

“Pour la malice un biablotin,  
Vrai singe par la mine,  
Pendant son grec et son latin :  
Ma foi—voilà—Pouchkine.”

From the hands of his private tutors he passed into the Imperial Lyceum at Tsarskoye-Selo, where, as a young student, he once recited one of his own poems at a public examination in the presence of a large company of guests, and was warmly applauded. The venerable poet Derzhavin happened to be in the audience. He rose from his seat and placed his hand in benediction upon the head of the promising youth. The Russian painter Ilja Repin has depicted the historical scene in an oil painting which we reproduce as frontispiece to this issue.

Such was Pushkin’s introduction into the great world of Russian life. Besides the favor of Derzhavin he enjoyed the friendship of Zhukovski, the other great poet of that age, and was in personal contact with the emperors Alexander I and Nicholas, the

former only temporarily, the latter very intimately. Pushkin, in 1817, exchanged the Lyceum for an appointment in the Foreign Office which gained him an audience in court circles and gave him unusual social prominence. His poetry was much noticed and greatly admired. In 1820 Pushkin completed an epic composition entitled "Ruslan and Ly'udmila" which showed genuine talent and promised still greater achievements for the future. Emperor Alexander I loved to pose as a liberal, and his attitude created a liberal spirit among the rising generation. Pushkin seems to have been affected by this; but when his "Ode to Liberty" fell into the hands of the Czar, Pushkin was banished from his gay circle to Bessarabia. He must have continued to transgress the bounds of imperial prescription, for in 1824 the poet was condemned by the Czar to retirement upon Mikhailovskoe, one of his family estates near Pskoff.

The poet well utilized his solitude by beginning his most important and best work, "Eugene Onyegin," of which the first installment appeared in 1826. He also finished a historical drama entitled "Boris Godunoff" and some uncensored poems which could not be published on Russian soil and so are extant only in written copies. Pushkin did not remain long banished from imperial favor, for when Alexander I died his successor Nicholas summoned the poet to court at once by special messenger to attend the coronation ceremony at Moscow.

Czar Nicholas appointed Pushkin historiographer of Peter the Great at a salary of 6000 rubles, with the title "Imperial Chamberlain," a title which was not to the poet's liking and gave rise to many jokes in the circle of his friends.

Pushkin had first been regarded as the leader of the liberal party, but his friendship with the Czar made him an object of suspicion among the friends of freedom and he was charged by them with being a traitor. The truth was that the poet was not a partisan at all and had never been one. He gave vent to his liberal or patriotic feelings as they came to him without swearing allegiance either to the ideals of nihilism or to the reactionism of Czardom.

In 1829 Pushkin published a historical composition entitled *Poltava*, and two volumes of poems in all of which the Emperor took a personal interest, and, on Pushkin's complaint of the mutilation of his poems by the censor, even went so far as to undertake their censorship himself.

In the same year the poet accompanied Field Marshal Paske-

vitch to Erzerum and described the expedition in a book which is still regarded as a model of Russian style.

In 1830 Pushkin continued his literary work on his estate more industriously than before. He wrote a tale, "The Cottage in Kolonna," in eight-lined stanzas, also a series of dramatic sketches, "The Miserly Knight", "Mozart and Salieri" and "A Festival During the Plague."

One of his literary friends, Baron Delwig, published many of Pushkin's shorter poems in his poetical periodicals, *Flowers of the North* and the *Literary Journal*. When Delwig died in 1831 Pushkin felt the loss deeply.

Pushkin was married on February 22, 1831, and the marriage was a very happy one. Pushkin spent most of his time in Tsarskoye Selo, near the capital, where he could often see Zhukovski and other friends.

About this time he wrote "The Legend of King Saltan," and patriotic poems, and he also began his "History of Peter the Great," which, however, was never completed.

In 1833 he wrote a romance entitled "The Captain's Daughter," and in 1836 "The Iron Ride," "The Stone Guest," "The Nymph of the Stream" and "Galub."

At this time Pushkin also finished his versified romance, "Eugene Onyegin," if such a composition may ever be called finished. It characterizes a definite type of Russian society and is either a story or a drama. A type like that which Pushkin describes in Onyegin exists only in Russia. He is a hero of society, endowed with every social advantage as well as natural intellectual endowment and educational equipment. Nevertheless his life is a failure. He is blasé and weary of life. He is unhappy because the social order of Russia does not offer him a field for his talents. He feels out of harmony with it. He has sufficient sympathy for mankind to feel the misery of his fellow men, but he sees no way to help. He is blasé for he has drained the cup of pleasure to the very lees and has nothing to expect in the future; even the most desirable pleasures have become stale to him. All he has to do is to kill time and please himself. He tries the arts, but without success, for his schooling is after all insufficient in its foundation, and he lacks energy to do serious work, without which he can accomplish nothing lasting. He also lacks seriousness of purpose and the determination to distinguish himself. He is a typical product of Russian conditions in aristocratic circles. There are nobler characters in Russia, and Pushkin contrasts Onyegin with the ideal

figure of Vladimir Lensky who still believes in a better and brighter future. He was educated far away from the turmoil of society and received a thorough intellectual equipment. He studied at the German universities and knows the shortcomings of his own country, but proves to be unable to make his influence felt, so that Russia is not benefited either by his talents or his aspirations.

It is characteristic of Pushkin's poem, which appears in several instalments, that no real plan pervades the whole, that it contains no hope for a higher future for Russia; but this peculiarity seems to be characteristic not only of Pushkin's work but of Russian poetry in general, for in fact the typical Russian's attitude toward social conditions is one of hopelessness, and he seems to regard any improvement or reform as impossible. This situation explains the existence of the nihilist propaganda which seeks salvation in a general destruction, hoping that after the deluge a new mankind will gloriously rise from the general ruin.

The unsatisfactory nature of "Onyegin" will naturally perplex the western reader, but such is the nature of the Russian character and of Russian poetry, and from this point of view we will also understand that stormy and inclement weather was most congenial to a poet of Pushkin's temperament. He felt that he could work more efficiently when wintry blasts from the north, or gray and heavy fogs, would confine ordinary people thankfully to the house and to the comforts of the fireside.

In 1836, when Pushkin lost his mother, he reserved a grave for himself at her side as if he felt that his own death was near at hand. Only a few months afterwards, on January 27, 1837, he became implicated in an unfortunate duel with Baron d'Anthès whose bullet cut short the life of Russia's most gifted poet.