

"Cemetery Path" by Leonard Q. Ross



Ivan was a timid little man--so timid that the villagers called him "Pigeon" or mocked him with the title "Ivan the Terrible." Every night Ivan stopped in at the saloon which was on the edge of the village cemetery. Ivan never crossed the cemetery to get to his lonely shack on the other side. The path through the cemetery would save him many minutes, but he had never taken it--not even in the full light of the moon.

Late on winter's night, when bitter wind and snow beat against the saloon, the customers took up the familiar mockery.

Ivan's sickly protest only fed their taunts, and they jeered cruelly when the young Cossack Lieutenant flung his horrid challenge at him.

You are a pigeon, Ivan. You'll walk all around the cemetery in this cold--but you dare not cross the cemetery.

Ivan murmured, "The cemetery is nothing to cross, Lieutenant. It is nothing but earth, like all the other earth."

The lieutenant cried. "A challenge then: Cross the cemetery tonight, Ivan, and I'll give you five rubles--five gold rubles!"

Perhaps it was the vodka. Perhaps it was the temptation of the five gold rubles. No one ever knew why Ivan, moistening his lips, said suddenly, "Yes, lieutenant, I'll cross the cemetery."

The saloon echoed with their disbelief. The lieutenant winked to the men and unbuckled his sword. "Here, Ivan. When you get to the center of the cemetery, in front of the biggest tomb, stick the

sword into the ground. In the morning we shall go there. And if the sword is in the ground-five rubles to you!"

Ivan took the sword. The men drank a toast: "To Ivan the Terrible!" They roared with laughter.

The wind howled around Ivan as he closed the door of the saloon behind him. The cold was knife-sharp. He buttoned his long coat and crossed the dirt road. He could hear the lieutenant's voice, louder than the rest, yelling after him, "Five rubles, pigeon: If you live!"

Ivan pushed the cemetery gate open. He walked fast. "Earth, just earth... like any other earth." But the darkness was a massive dread. "Five gold rubles...." The wind was cruel, and the sword was like ice in his hands. Ivan shivered under the long, thick coat and broke into a limping run.

He recognized the large tomb. He must have sobbed--that was drowned in the wind. And he kneeled, cold and terrified, and drove the sword into the hard ground. With his fist, he beat it down to the hilt. It was done. The cemetery--the challenge... five gold rubles.

Ivan started to rise from his knees. But he could not move. Something held him. Something gripped him in an unyielding hold. Ivan tugged and lurched and pulled-gasping in his panic, shaken by a monstrous fear. But something held Ivan. He cried out in terror, then made senseless gurgling noises.

They found Ivan, next morning, on the ground in front of the tomb that was in the center of the cemetery. His face was not that of a frozen man's, but of a man killed by some nameless horror. And the lieutenant's sword was in the ground where Ivan had pounded it-- through the dragging folds of his long coat.

S. McCully

What happened?
