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THREE
DUKES





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THREE DUKES

BY

G. YSTRIDDE

G. P. PUTNAM'S SONS
NEW YORK AND LONDON
The Knickerbocker Press

1904

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BY

G. YSTRIDDE

The Knickerbocker Press, New York

There came three dukes a-riding, a-riding, a-riding,
There came three dukes a-riding, with a ransom-tansum,
tiddleum-dee.

“Pray what are your intentions, intentions, intentions?
Pray what are your intentions—with a ransom-tansum,
tiddleum-dee?”

“Our intention is to marry, to marry, to marry.
Our intention is to marry, with a ransom-tansum,
tiddleum-dee.’

“Will one of my fair daughters do, daughters do, daughters
do?
Will one of my fair daughters do, with a ransom-tansum,
tiddleum-dee? ”

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Three Dukes

PART I

THE YELLOW CASTLE

CHAPTER I

AN OLD LADY AND A YOUNG ONE

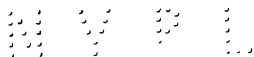
“**M**AY my eyes drop out on the spot—may the thunder smash me—may I die unblest if I did not carry it on my head!”

“All the same thou liest, Akulina! Swear again.”

“May the devil devour me in the next world—may the lightning scorch me—may I drop dead this instant if I did not carry it on my head!”

“All the same thou liest, Akulina,” repeated the drawling voice which had uttered the same emphatic phrase before.

“Seraphima Profirovna, may God preserve you! It 's the truth. There 's the sign of the cross for you!”



Minnie Carey, sitting up in bed in the next room, listening to this somewhat startling conversation, pictured the peasant woman bending before the Holy Image.

"Thou liest! Go and change the water. Think not thou canst deceive me. There!"

A splash accompanied the last word, and Akulina appeared in the doorway carrying a pail of water dashed with coffee.

"What on earth were you swearing so for? There's no thunder in winter, you know," said Minnie, putting her fluffy head round the corner of the screen.

The woman laid her finger on her lip, nodded her head towards the room she had left, and went her way.

Minnie slipped out of bed, stretched her arms above her head, and gave a sobbing sigh for air. Though she was almost choked with heat, the sealed and wadded windows gave upon a park glittering like a transformation scene in its drapery of snow. Icicles hung from the snow-patched fir-trees and the barer beeches, but the stretch of sky above was deeply, coldly blue, brilliant and hard as a slab of polished turquoise. Looking out from the stiflingly hot room at this dazzling contrast of colour, Minnie almost felt as if it were a masquerade of winter, a gigantic panorama, tantalising in the white freshness of its cold purity.

Nearly all night she had tossed and turned in



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her hot bed, maddened with heat and bites from slowly creeping, evil-smelling little insects, bathed in perspiration, and startled at length from a short interval of forgetfulness by the sound of an angry voice echoing down the wide staircase through the door she had left open to prevent absolute suffocation,—a voice shouting hoarsely—“Fool—thrice-cursed fool, fool—fool!”

A glance at her watch showed her that it was half-past ten, and, horrified at the lateness of the hour, she turned to the dilapidated washstand, with its cracked, stained marble top, pressed the squeaking spring with a bare white foot, and, finding there was no water, sat down on the side of the bed to wait for Akulina.

The room was large and lofty, but dingy to absolute dirtiness, and, from an English point of view, not half-furnished. The reddish paper hung here and there in strips, and the curtains were so musty that the slightest touch would have brought down clouds of dust. A large chintz screen, looking as if it had been dragged from long repose in a lumber-room, cut off the bed, table, and washstand from the remainder of the room, which was used as a corridor leading to the apartment out of which had issued Akulina's appeals to the thunder and lightning. The floor was bare, and the only thing upon the rickety, uncovered table was Minnie's holland-covered dressing-case.

Akulina returned, carrying a pail of water on

her head. She was a middle-aged woman, in a grey skirt and a much-embroidered blouse and apron, a kerchief hiding her greyish hair.

Through the half-open door Minnie heard a second edition of the former conversation, ending this time with a grunt of doubtful conviction instead of a defiant splash.

“Bring me some water, please,” said Minnie, as the servant reappeared, shutting the door behind her.

“Why on earth is it so terribly hot here?” she asked, as Akulina stood by the washstand pouring water into the rusty, narrow cistern.

“It’s above the stove—the great stove which heats the whole house. Pantalé heats it twice a day. *Barin’s* orders. *Barin* likes heat.”

Though Minnie did not relish the prospect of being half-roasted every night, the answer roused a hope that the other arrangements of the house, in spite of dingy appearances, might be in accordance with the convenient—though exaggerated—heating.

“Is there a bath-room? I should like a bath after three days’ travelling.”

“There is a bath-room, but only for *barin* and *barina*. Even *barishna* is n’t allowed to go there. It’s so pretty; a marble floor, and steps; quite a picture. All the same, it’s spoilt. It’s a dreadful fuss when *barina* takes a bath. The hot water must be brought from the kitchen across

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the court. *Barina* has a bath before the holidays."

At this proof of the sourness of the grapes and the idea of a bath as a solemn and rare ceremony, Minnie smiled. She had passed the four years of her life in Russia in Odessa, which is scarcely like a Russian town, and quite European in the arrangement of its houses.

"Well, Akulina, and can't you open the window? I'm just stifled here. I don't see a free pane, but perhaps the outer——"

"God preserve you, *barishna!*" exclaimed Akulina, in horrified alarm. "Don't touch the windows for mercy's sake! Holy, heavenly mother! You can't open them if you try, and *barin* will be wild if you meddle with them."

"And the ventilators?" asked Minnie as a forlorn hope, looking at a slab of brass with its pendant cord; "I've tried, but can't open them."

"*Barin* had them sealed up."

"How idiotic!" thought Minnie, but kept the compliment to herself. Evidently, for Akulina, *barin's* will was divine law.

"And the—the insects? You must clean the mattress."

"The mattress is clean, *barishna*; they're in the wall. When *panitch* is here—this is his room—he used to thump on the wall half the night with his boot. I heard him. I sleep in the corridor. In the morning he says to me: 'Akulina, these

beasts of insects give me no peace.' And I says: 'Panitch, I will pull your bed out from the wall at night.' And he says, 'Molodetz, Akulina.' And after that he slept in peace."

Minnie smiled at the woman's queer talk, which she barely understood.

"What were you swearing about just now?" she asked as Akulina gathered up her skirt and boots preparatory to cleaning them.

"It 's the old lady, Seraphima Profirovna. She is very strange. I must always carry her water on my head. She is that awful afraid of dogs."

"Now what *have* dogs to do with it?" thought Minnie, staring perplexedly at Akulina's retreating back. "Funny place, this, at all events. My fellow-traveller did n't exaggerate. 'The half has not been told.'"

With which echo of the Queen of Sheba's sentiments, she drew the screen closer, took as good a substitute for a bath as she could, and arranged her pretty hair without the aid of a looking-glass.

She was one of those lucky girls whose *coiffeur* is Nature herself. Her fluffy hair clung round her forehead, ears, and neck in a most becoming way; and the loose coil placed high or low is a mere detail, as women and hairdressers know.

She heard the door open, and shuffling footsteps pass along the other side of the screen, and on entering the immense dining-room she saw a

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worried-looking footman, in dingy "English" livery, disputing with a most original-looking old lady.

She was very tall and very stout, and wore a dress so short as to suggest to Minnie reminiscences of the old woman "who went to sleep on the King's Highway," and the avenging pedlar who "cut her petticoats all round about." History saith that on awakening the old woman doubted her identity. "Goodness gracious, mercy on us! this is none of I!"

Seraphima Profirovna did not for one instant think that she was none of she. Whatever might be the state of her intellect as regards dogs and water, she was quite sure that she was Seraphima Profirovna Dubrovskina-Dotomskia, *dvorianka*, of one of the oldest untitled families in Russia. Though she could barely read or scrawl her own name, she was as proud of her birth as the typical Spanish grandee.

She held a cigarette between her fingers, her black cap was perched on the back of her head, and her short skirts allowed a liberal view of ankles and feet of ample proportions, the latter encased in hideous felt slippers.

Minnie did not catch what she said to the footman, but it must have been something particularly exasperating, to judge by the man's reply.

"For God's sake, Seraphima Profirovna, leave

me in peace! You have caused me to fall into consumption. Behold me! Thin as a stick!"

"You were thin when you came, you know," Seraphima Profirovna reminded him, putting her cigarette between her slightly moustached lips and turning to confront Minnie.

The tall, grotesque figure faced the small, dainty one for a second or two in silence, then the old lady said: "You are the English teacher. It's a pity you've come just now. My niece and her daughters are away. I told her to send the telegram sooner, but she was always obstinate. Good-morning."

"Good-morning," repeated Minnie, and held out her hand.

The old lady jumped back, putting her hands behind her so suddenly that she dropped her cigarette. Minnie picked it up.

"Thank you. Throw it in the grate. I never shake hands with any one. I have a disease in my hands."

There were two "English" hearths in the room, large and empty. An immensely broad French window, sealed and wadded like all the other windows in the house, gave upon a marble terrace, from whence a flight of steps led into the park. The table, long as it was, seemed lost in the vast apartment, while the bronzes, velvet chairs, divans, and cabinets, grouped at one end, appeared absurdly small.

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As there was no sign of coffee, Minnie moved towards one of the chairs. Seraphima Profirovna made a spasmodic gesture of horror with her stiffly held hands.

"Not there, not there, my child!" she exclaimed, without the least thought of Mrs. Hemans. "That is my chair."

"I beg your pardon," said Minnie, and stood in the middle of the room, feeling rather awkward, till the consumptive footman brought in the coffee, and Seraphima Profirovna invited her to take her place and help herself.

"I never drink coffee here. Akulina brings me my breakfast in my room," she condescended to explain.

Minnie seated herself, a small, solitary figure, at the long table. Before her was a mug of delicious cream, a pat of golden butter, and a plate of crisp, home-made bread; the consumptive footman handed her a glass of steaming coffee. She was healthily hungry, despite her bad night, and made a good breakfast, the pallid footman watching her resignedly.

Seraphima Profirovna walked up and down the room, holding her hands stiffly in front of her as if she imagined she was carrying something fragile.

"We did not know whether you would come or not," she remarked, after a pause. "It is lucky we sent to meet you. Vladimir Vladimirovich

said you might not get the telegram in time. My niece has gone to town to be treated for her nerves. She has very bad nerves. So has Marusia. In my young days girls did n't have nerves."

"That's a pity. That your niece has bad nerves, I mean," said Minnie, in order to say something. In reality she was not thinking of any one's nerves, but only how splendid it would be to get out into that white wonder of a park.

"You speak Russian pretty well," remarked the old lady. "How did you learn it?"

"I listened and picked it up. But"—here a dimple showed in her cheek, and her eyes, blue as a baby's, deep as a woman's, twinkled—"I speak it awfully. Every one laughs at me. I make such queer mistakes."

"Your accent is queer, but I understand you."

"Wait till I try a long conversation with you. It will make you sit up."

The slang phrase—or rather the Russian equivalent for it—contrasted strangely with her lady-like voice and manner.

"Akulina says that a young man was with you last night. Who was he?"

The question was put with almost awed curiosity, as if a young man were a rare and costly article.

"He told me his name, but I've forgotten it. I'm an awful duffer at Russian names. Maxi-

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millian something*vich*. A neighbour of yours, he said."

"Maximillian Ardilionovich Galovkine, the duchess's son!" exclaimed Seraphima Profirovna, in a flutter. "And that idiot Akulina did not know him! What was he doing in your company?" she demanded, as if the duchess's son ought to have no dealings with an English girl.

The tone half-amused, half-annoyed Minnie.

"He was carrying my portmanteau," she said demurely.

"Yes, yes, I know. Akulina told me. But how did he make your acquaintance?"

"In the train. We travelled together from Ekaterinslav."

"And he paid you attention?"

"He was very nice," said Minnie, stiffly, but stiffness was lost on Seraphima Profirovna. She was as thick-skinned as an elephant.

"All young men like to flirt, my dove! Don't you think anything of that. You're much too little to be pretty, you know."

Vexation and amusement struggled for a second in Minnie's expressive face, then the latter won, and she burst out laughing.

"You may laugh, but I'm quite right," Seraphima Profirovna assured her. "Men don't like such little creatures as you. To please them *il faut être belle femme*."

Despite her ignorance of most things worth

knowing, the old lady had picked up a little French during a long residence in her niece's house, where that language was spoken more often than Russian.

"*Belle femme*," she repeated, "with shoulders and a bust—so!" She made a comical gesture which she imagined was suggestive of the feminine form divine. "And you are nothing but eyes and hair."

"I am as God made me," said Minnie, as one who dismisses a subject. In fact it was a sore point. When she thought of it, which was not too often, she regretted her own smallness.

"And so the duchess's son has come home," repeated Seraphima Profirovna.

"Why only 'the duchess's'?" thought Minnie. "What about the duke? Are there other Russian dukes besides the grand ones? '*Gertzoghina*,' she says. Mystery! And why must he be always spoken of as somebody's son? He is n't a baby."

"When my niece was in Petersburg last winter," went on Seraphima Profirovna, "he was a constant visitor. Of course he came for Lydia. He paid her great attention. She is very much admired. Of course it will be a match. Vladimir Vladimirovich can have nothing against it. He is young, rich, and a *dvorianine*. Leda should be thankful to get him. So many girls have to put up with old men, widowers, 'personal nobles,' or something of that sort, or remain old maids.

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Leda is admired, it is true, but admiration is n't marriage, and—holy, heavenly mother! how difficult it is to get a husband nowadays!"

Having uttered this profound reflection, Seraphima Profirovna sat down in her own particular chair, and put her feet upon her own particular footstool.

"Lunch is at twelve," she told Minnie, as the girl rose from the table.

"Must I come in for it? It is past eleven now. I sha'n't be hungry."

"As you like. You are free while your pupils are away. Dinner is at six."

"She seems to be quite rational, after all," thought Minnie. "Rather funny, but normal."

Before she reached the door she was called back.

"For Heaven's sake, my dove, if you do go out, don't touch the dogs!" entreated Seraphima Profirovna, with tragic earnestness.

CHAPTER II

THE DUCHESS'S SON AND THE DUCHESS, AND SOMETHING OF HER DAUGHTER

SERAPHIMA PROFIROVNA was quite mistaken when she called the duchess's son rich. Though his estate was five thousand *desyatines*, it was mortgaged to the uttermost, and as he was manfully trying to clear it there remained a bare two thousand a year for himself and his sister.

Two thousand a year does not sound bad, but as it was roubles, and not pounds, its value was reduced tenfold.

The duchess had a life interest in the estate, and, being always in want of money, descended every now and again upon Bielovka, and urged her son to arrange matters with his creditors, sell the place, and get a government appointment.

"There's Ivan Ivanovich, your father's cousin, in the Treasury, and Peter Petrovich, my cousin, in the War Office, and many more of our relations in Petersburg. You have only to go there and get them to use their influence. Why did your grandfather let you take up the Natural Science course? It makes it more difficult for you to get

a place. I have heard of many students serving as excisemen. And a gentleman whose cousin was acquainted with him——”

“With his own cousin?” interrupted Maximilian. “Well, it’s not surprising to be acquainted with your own cousin. You need not look so portentously serious about that, mother.”

“I wish you would not interrupt me, Maximilian!”—the duchess always called her son by his full name when she was vexed with him. “Of course he was acquainted with his own cousin. Why should n’t he be? I was about to say that his cousin was acquainted with a student of Natural Science who was a *nadzaratel*. He told me so himself.”

“Who? The cousin or the gentleman or the *nadzaratel*?”

“Maximilian! You are quite dense, sometimes.”

Max laughed.

“Don’t you think I should make a good *nadzaratel*?” he inquired with seeming anxiety, as if the prospect of being a police inspector would have appealed to him but for doubts as to his efficiency.

“Really, Maximilian, I can’t imagine where you get your ideas from! Don’t you know—unhappy boy—that the place of *nadzaratel* is fit only for quite low people?”

“I am always glad to learn, mother. What

can you expect but ignorance from such a clodhopper as I?"

This exaggerated humility only annoyed the duchess. She could never understand Max in his teasing moods.

"I know," she exclaimed pathetically, "that we are well-nigh reduced to beggary; that my Italian daughters are almost dowerless, that my Russian daughter is a *divorcée*, or what amounts to the same thing—and a *coursiste*. But I should wish my son to remember that he is a Russian *dvorianine* and to——"

"You are no longer a *dvorianka*," Maximilian reminded her mischievously. "I have heard that Seraphima Profirovna tried to solve a problem, Could she hold out the right hand of fellowship to you as an equal? I speak figuratively, as she never holds out her hand to any one. Still she was puzzled about it."

"The old idiot!" exclaimed the duchess, viciously.

"But Vladimir Vladimirovich was generous enough to say that though, of course, a foreign noble is by no means equal to a Russian *dvorianine*, still the fact of his nobility is indisputable—when he has a title; otherwise, it is very doubtful."

The duchess did not seem mollified by the broad-minded decision of Vladimir Vladimirovich.

"I think, Maximillian, you might be more considerate of my feelings than to repeat such things to me. It is most annoying. The insolent old fool!"

"You have literally no sense of humour, *ma-motchka*. Not a scrap," Maximillian assured her, laughing.

"Now what *has* humour to do with it? And what are you laughing at? It is so silly to laugh at nothing."

Max, finding it useless to explain the joke, kissed his mother's hand and soothed her ruffled feelings, as he well knew how. There was at times something irresistibly boyish about this tall young man in spite of his virile face and figure.

The duchess was rather a fine-looking woman still, in spite of her prominent cheek-bones and the hollows beneath. If she had only learnt how to accept the fact of her middle-age gracefully, she would have gained much. As it was, she not infrequently made herself ridiculous. She always felt aggrieved with her children for growing up so quickly, especially with Max for looking every minute of his twenty-five years. Vèra, though slightly older, looked as if still in her teens, despite the drama of her marriage and her life of aim and study. But in face of a son like Maximillian, even by asserting that she had married at fifteen, the duchess could not claim to be in the first bloom and freshness of her youth.

Max would not sell the estate. He loved it.

•

The long, one-storied white house, the park, the distant forest, and the almost boundless steppe seemed parts of himself. Life in towns oppressed him. He confessed to Vèra that often, when walking in a crowded street, he was seized with a wild and futile desire to sweep the houses away. They seemed to hinder free breathing. He was a son of the steppe. He loved the white wonder of it in winter, the snowy silence of its bediamonded expanse; its spring freshness with the flowers peeping through the last thin layer of snow, and even its summer brownness, freshened by the river which cut across it like a blade of brilliant blue. Vèra loved it too, and left the Course abruptly, at times, in the middle of term, for a breath of its free air.

Max's father had died when he was a baby. After as short a retirement as convention allows, the widow went to Petersburg, where she got into debt and met her duke. At the time of the marriage, Max was not four years old, and Vèra eighteen months older. They were left with their grandparents. It was a mistake, the future duchess declared, to take children away from their fatherland; to blur their nationality. Brought up in Italy they would be neither Russians nor Italians. Both nations would look upon them as aliens: the latter on account of their birth, the former because of their education. So they must be left behind.

"It is a terrible trial, but love demands sacrifices," the newly made bride said pathetically to her former mother-in-law. "I have already given up much for Mario. My rights as a Russian *dvorianka*,—or most of them,—my country, the society I am accustomed to shine in, my relations, and now my children. It is woman's fate to sacrifice herself!"

She put a tiny lace handkerchief to her eyes, which prevented her from seeing the other woman's frown.

Only the prospect of mothering her son's children kept Ekaterina Ivanovna serene under such provocation, for she had a quick temper and quite old-fashioned ideas as to "woman's fate."

During the first years of her married life she had ruled over her household of serfs with the proverbial hand of velvet masking steel. Nothing went on without her knowledge, from love-affairs to cross-stitch and preserve-making. She was interested in the first and most particular about the last. As to the cross-stitch, every towel in the house was thick with it at both ends; while those for the children set forth, in addition, such stitched commands as: "Wash well and dry thyself properly." "Maximillian" was a good name for a border, flanked on either side by a cock, a coronet, or some fearful and wonderful architectural structure. The boy was proud of it, and crowed over his sister.

"You have only *four* letters in your name, and look at mine!" he would say, exhibiting a towel. "Yours is n't worth embroidering."

"You're only 'Max,' except on towels," Vèra would reply disdainfully; "and I am 'Vèrushka' or 'Vèrotchka,' and sometimes 'Vèrusinka.' Besides, those towels were made for grandfather; nurse says so. You are not the only 'Maximilian.'"

Thus did Vèra assert her superiority, even over a boy rejoicing in the name of Maximilian, which seems made to go with such appellations as "the Mighty," or "the Magnificent."

The mighty Maximilian would twist the towel round his chubby fingers, and insist: "All the same, my name's the longest. But it does n't really matter, Vèrushka."

He was a nice-tempered child.

But Ekaterina Ivanovna, before the Emancipation, looked after other things beside the cross-stitching of towels to last for a quarter of a century. If one of her men-servants coveted a neighbour's maid-servant, she tried to arrange matters—if the choice met with her approval—by inducing her husband to suggest an exchange to the owner of the coveted one. If the offer was accepted, the girl changed masters and gained a husband.

Max had found several curious documents relating to this exchange and barter among his grand-

father's papers, in which the precise legal terms read as if they referred to two promising horses set apart for breeding purposes.

Ekaterina Ivanovna was more than their own mother would ever have been to the children. Five-year-old Max turned from the duchess when she came to spend a summer at Bielovka, two years after her marriage.

"That woman is not my mother," he said decisively. "I'd rather have you, *babotchka*. Please."

Twenty-five-year-old Max was less outspoken, and more tolerant towards the duchess's follies and foibles.

But though Ekaterina Ivanovna had done her best for the children, the wreck of Vèra's marriage made her doubtful as to the wisdom of that best in the girl's case.

When the two-months' wife arrived at Bielovka, saying she had left her husband for ever, she added no explanations and gave no reasons, only looked with wide eyes into her grandmother's face, and said in a low voice: "Why did n't you tell me, *babotchka*?"

These words, pondered over during many a sleepless night, caused the principles of a life to totter. Yet what could she have told? Little enough. She had wilfully shut her eyes all her life, or had been willing to let them be blinded. Husbands have a life outside that of their wives,

of course,—secret gardens into which a wise woman does not seek to pry. She must bear and bring up children, entertain, marry her daughters, welcome her grandchildren, and die. It is the common lot. The woman who tries to escape it is abnormal—unprincipled. Young girls always have pretty fancies. Let them be. They will learn in time that marriage is prose. And now Vèra had come home with that look of revolt on her face, and those unforgettable words on her lips. Was it better, then, to face life fully? To demand more from it and from men? Hard questions for a woman of two generations ago! Only one thing was clear to her: Vèra would never tread in the beaten track that she herself had followed all her life. One thought was bitterer than all,—perhaps even Vèra's frivolous mother would have been a better guide for the girl, in that in her careless way she would have shown her more of life.

But her perplexities were soon ended, as everything ends as far as this world is concerned, and Vèra and Max were left alone in the long white house in the midst of the white steppe.

And by degrees these two grew very near to each other, with a nearness deeper than that of the *cameradie* of childhood. Max watched the forming of a character.

"He only married me for my dowry," she told him. "Small as it was, it helped him at an awkward time. And then I was considered a

good match on account of our very respectable connections. Such a marriage 'posed' him well enough, and it was time for him to marry. As for love—he had got over all that long ago. The spark of mere animal passion he had for me faded at once. He was not true to me a week. I know it. Are all men like that?" she asked with a flash.

"We are all of us bad enough, God knows, Vèrushka. But some of us are not past redemption, and do happen to have hearts to give to our wives. And really, a woman has such influence over most of us, if she understands."

"That 's just it," said Vèra, with another flash. "*If she understands.* And how are we to understand, pray? Brought up in a fool's paradise and married before we are out of our teens! By the time we understand it is too late."

"I did not mean that as a reproach for you. I suppose your husband is past a woman's influence—for good. I was speaking in general. If only young girls were not so silly—or so fast," he added, thinking of a few town acquaintances, who had certainly never lived in a "fool's paradise."

"Why do they make us so silly?" demanded Vèra.

"I tell you what," said Max, with conviction, "let us take a gallop over the steppe and clear the cobwebs away. Don't worry, Vèrushka. Take life as it is."

“And the dark places? Are we to go past them with shut eyes, or live in them ‘as they are’?”

“Let the light into them, and clear them out,” suggested Max.

“Ah—but to do so, some of us must descend into them and stay there pretty long,” said Vèra.

Serious young men with problems to discuss which they regarded as personal discoveries, and theories to expound which they imagined to be all their own invention; psychologists, as curious about their own and others’ souls or “inner consciousness” as an imaginary invalid about his symptoms; philosophers who quoted Nietzsche with personal introduction and comments, generally decided that Maximilian Ardilionovich was a frivolous-minded young man, a mere country bumpkin, or a selfish young animal interested in nothing beyond his own limited existence.

He abhorred discussion, which is rare in an educated Russian, for no other nation under the sun is so given to philosophy, psychology, and self-analysis.

But to Vèra, being moulded anew by the heavy touch of real life, he was sympathetic in his silence and rare speech. She spoke freely to him. And a woman of fine perceptions never speaks so to any man unless she feels that she is understood. When she once feels this, it is wonderful how the most reserved revel in self-revelation.

"I should like to burn all the novels and poetry in the world," she said to him once. "All except the sort I was not allowed to read. You know how particular grandmother was. My chief source of literature was *La Bibliothèque des Jeunes Filles*, and carefully selected novels by Octave Feuillet et Ohnet,—more French than Russian. Since I have read what I choose, I see that there are not many of that sort in our language."

"We are realists," said Max.

"I should give every girl who thinks of marriage *The Kreutzer Sonata* to read. Zola—he is hideous at times, but he turns the light on dark places. But those books of life as it is *not*! How I hate them!"

"I wonder," she said again, "if many girls in Russia are brought up as I have been. Nearly all my friends are. There are the Gortchnikoff girls. It's just the same thing with them. A French governess and *La Bibliothèque des Jeunes Filles*; an English one and the novel of English love, courtship, and a wedding in the last chapter, or a death—a nicely arranged, poetical death; a German governess and Marlitt with her duchesses and counts and cross-purposes. The Gortchnikoffs are more to be pitied, for every one of the family is more or less mad. The 'grown-ups,' I mean."

"Yes, a queer lot, altogether," admitted Max.

"Marusia is a poor creature, with not strength

enough even to suffer. She 'll lounge through life polishing her nails and being read to. But Leda—I 'm sorry for Leda; she has something in her."

"Oh, she 's a plucky girl; if her life goes wrong, she 'll try and put it right—like you, Vèra."

When Vèra adjusted herself at last, which was a slow but sure process, she went to Petersburg to study medicine. In order to do so, as she had no "gymnasium" certificate, she was obliged to pass a very stiff examination. She was determined never to take a *kopeck* from her husband, even had he wished to give her an allowance or restore her dowry, which he did not dream of doing. Divorce is difficult to obtain in Russia, as yet. A husband can cause his truant wife to be sent back to him by order of the police, if he chooses; he has but to refuse to give her a separate passport.

But Vèra's husband yielded up the necessary paper without the slightest difficulty. His marriage had been a mistake, he owned. Instead of the soft and pliant wife he had expected to find in the dreamy country girl, he had—to use his own expression—caught a Tartar, and was only too glad to let her go. He slipped quickly back into his bachelor habits, and almost forgot he was married.

CHAPTER III

A CHANCE ACQUAINTANCE

MAX had been returning from a month's visit to his mother and step-sisters when he met Minnie Carey at Ekaterinslav.

Despite the beauty and interest of the historic city, his stay had been a period of by no means unmixed delight. The duke had been dead five years, and for the last three all the duchess's energies had been devoted to seeking husbands for her daughters.

To this end she kept open house on almost nothing a year, got into debt, borrowed money from her daughters' companion, ate fried potatoes and macaroni, and dressed in a shabby *peignoir* on the days when there were no guests. She knew no middle course. There is a children's game of ball with the refrain: "Silk, satin, muslin, rags"; and the dropping of the ball decides the tissue of the child's future garments. The duchess and her daughters wore all four: the three former in public, the latter in private.

All the good things—the delicious confectionery, the *liqueurs*, the wine, even the bon-bons—were

kept for guest-days. Floria, the youngest daughter, was always fumbling at locked drawers, and grumbling at the giving over of the spoil to the indifferent crowd.

She was the only one of the girls who had any claims to prettiness. Nowadays a vast amount is written and spoken about the Improvement of the Human Race. Those good, serious people who suggest the forming of committees for the regulation of marriages with a view to that improvement, should remember that though our indiscretions do not always serve us well, our deep-laid plots often fail. The most judicious pairing of "the fittest" may not produce "fit" offspring. To take a case in point, the duke and duchess were both of them, physically, at least, of the fittest; but their children—with one exception—were ailing and plain. As regards beauty, there are three classes of women in the world: Those whom everybody thinks pretty, those whom some think pretty, and those whom no one thinks pretty.

The duchess's two elder daughters belonged to the third class, and the youngest to the second.

There was, as yet, but small consolation for the duchess in the thought of Floria's prettiness, as at fifteen—"the age when I was first married" the duchess was always saying—the girl was a hoyden; careless in dress, even on guest-days, which turned carelessness from a virtue to a vice—incorrigibly mischievous, and absolutely rebellious against the

graces of polite society—naturally no man would take her seriously, admire her though he might as a pretty child.

Floria was in the seventh heaven when the family went to Bielovka "to retrench"; though, as the duchess threw away as much money on the journey as she saved in the retirement of the steppe, the term is misleading. Floria adored Max and to him she was only second to Vèra.

Leonora, the eldest daughter, was tall and thin, with features as angular as her shoulders, reddish hair, and eyes which, for some reason or another, she firmly believed to be beautiful. The way she rolled them and cast them up and down at any man who spoke to her made Max feel quite sorry for her. As a dutiful daughter should, she did her best to help forward her mother's plans for her with a zeal so evident as to defeat her purpose.

Julietta, with her name of sweet tradition, was quite conscious of its irony. She knew she was plain. She was quite square in figure—though half Italian—and stout. She was considered stupid, as she hardly ever opened her lips.

"Julietta is silent to excess. But she has a heart of gold and firm principles. She takes all the burden of housekeeping off my shoulders," the duchess would say, as if in strict confidence, to men no longer young and beginning to feel the want of a home and a wife to whose devotion they could trust in their declining years.

Max suggested taking Floria with him to Bielovka, and was warmly seconded by the girl herself. But the duchess would not hear of it.

"She will really get quite unmanageable. She is so wild. Of course, Max, I cannot expect you to understand the training of young girls, and Vèra—is nearly always away from home."

A look in Max's eyes, brought there by the tone of the words "and Vèra," had caused a hasty alteration in the latter part of the sentence.

Her real reason for refusing to part with Floria was quite distinct from the fear of her running wild. The duchess had remarked that, child as she was, her youngest daughter attracted young people to the house; and though the motive might be frivolous, their coming might lead to serious beginnings in other directions.

So Max went back to Russia alone, and at Ekaterinslav met Minnie Carey, whose acquaintance he made through the unconscious medium of Anna Kriedlova.

When Minnie entered the ladies' waiting-room at Ekaterinslav at two o'clock in the morning she found upon the slippery divan a huddled heap of wet misery which she coaxed into form and coherence. It was Anna Kriedlova, a nursemaid, returning home after four months in a very hard situation, where she had possessed her soul in patience as long as possible for the sake of the thirty roubles she wished to take home to her mother. They

had been stolen from her; rifled from her hand-bag while she slept; the thief generously leaving her her ticket, passport, and testimonials.

Minnie soothed the girl as well as she could in her wonderful Russian, and even succeeded in winning a laugh from her. That was Minnie's specialty. She would have drawn laughter instead of tears from a stone. It was perhaps her way of spiting Fate, who had dealt her some very nasty knocks. "It does n't hurt a bit," some plucky children say sturdily when their play-mates kick or pinch them. If they squeeze back the tears, they keep their secret.

Anna Kriedlova was soon sitting side by side with Minnie in the refreshment-room, drinking a glass of hot coffee, and eating sandwiches.

Minnie talked to her cheerfully between mouth-fuls, unmindful of the young man marching up and down the almost deserted hall. Except just before and after the holidays, when there is a frantic rush for the trains, the Russian railways are seldom crowded.

But Max looked and listened, and, hearing a phrase or two of Minnie's daring Russian, became interested.

"I saved every *kopeck* of my wages for four months to give to mother," said Anna. "And now to think I was working for some wretch of a man, after all! The place was such a hard one. *Barina* was always scolding, and the children were

so spoilt. But I would n't go home without money. There are six of us, and I'm the eldest. Thirty roubles is n't much to you, of course, but for me——”

Minnie laughed with seeming irrelevance. But she was amused by the notion of being thought rich. She would reach her destination with less than a rouble in her pocket and the world.

“It's a pity, but it can't be helped,” she said consolingly. “Crying's no good. Weeping will not uplift deposited milk.”

Minnie's Russian version of the English proverb was so funny that Anna opened round, puzzled eyes, and Max, turning on his heel, stifled a laugh.

“Thefts seem frequent on this line,” went on Minnie. “My fur cap was stolen last night from the ladies' coupé. When I found it was gone, I thanked Heaven that the thief had been good enough to leave me my boots. I had another hat with me in the carriage, fortunately. But imagine having to go without boots in this weather! Perhaps my thief thought of that. How good of him!”

As a matter of fact she wore a large hat trimmed with velvet and violets, which, though scarcely seasonable, suited the violet-eyed face beneath it to perfection.

She struck her last rouble against her plate to attract the attention of one of the sleepy waiters,

and, having paid the bill, she and her companion rose and paced the room after the manner of wearied and stiffened travellers.

Max had remarked Anna Kriedlova's rifled hand-bag lying beside Minnie's portmanteau on the divan. Thinking himself free from observation, he stealthily seized upon the battered little article, and slipped into it three gold pieces of ten roubles each.

He was rather hard up himself at the time, but it was certainly more just that he should lose thirty roubles than the poor girl who had worked for them four months.

As he replaced the bag he looked up to see Minnie regarding him in the mirror opposite. He flushed uncomfortably, like a thief caught in the act, and sent an imploring mirrored look at the mirrored eyes. Turning, she smiled at him across the room. He smiled back rather awkwardly and made for the door.

Minnie entered into the spirit of the plot. It was delightful. She did not overestimate Max's furtive act, as she had just been regretting her inability to do the same, but it pleased her immensely.

As if tired of pacing the room, she returned to the divan and took up the hand-bag with a fine show of abstraction, followed by a cry as of astonishment.

"Your thief was even more thoughtful than

mine. He took your purse and returned your money."

"Impossible!" exclaimed Anna Kriedlova.

"See for yourself."

She did so, and catching Minnie's hand stooped to kiss it.

Minnie drew it away sharply. "It was not I. Really it was not I," she said hastily.

"Can you cross yourself upon it?"

"No, I can't, or rather I won't. It is not the custom of my people. But I give you my word it was not I. It was a gentleman who was here just now."

"Point him out to me, mademoiselle."

"Mademoiselle" laughed. "I shall do nothing of the sort. Spare his blushes. But I *am* glad. Now your home-coming won't be spoilt."

"What a good man!" said the girl, fervently. "I shall burn a Kazanskie candle to the Holy Mother, and pray for him every time I go to church."

When Max entered the second-class compartment as the train was starting he looked round for a convenient seat, and came upon Minnie. He flushed, she smiled; whereupon he sat down on the opposite lounge.

In Russian second-class compartments the lounges face each other, so that every four form a separate nook. Max and Minnie were alone save for the continual passing to and fro of the prowling conductor and a restless traveller or two.

She had made herself comfortable. Her *shuba* hung on the nail above her, and, falling between her and the shabby velvet of the lounge, made a soft corner cushion; her hat and gloves were on the rack with her rug and portmanteau. The flickering light of the lantern fell on her thus cosily ensconced. Some people have the knack of making themselves at home everywhere,—even in a Russian second-class railway carriage. After her welcoming smile at Max she sat quite still. The droop of her dark lashes was very pretty, but he wished she would raise them. He preferred the upward glance and smile. Calling himself a fool for wishing a girl to smile at him, he pulled the *Novoe Vreimya* from his pocket and read by the dim light of the lantern until his eyes were tired; then, smothering a yawn, he looked out of the window at the endless white steppe, and turned to find Minnie's eyes fixed upon him with a calm scrutiny.

“And your companion?” he asked involuntarily.

“She is travelling third, and probably praying for you. She said she would.”

“Oh, you did n't tell her it was I, did you?” he asked in dismay.

“I said ‘A gentleman’; that's broad enough, is n't it?” she asked with a laugh.

Nothing breaks the ice like laughter. He asked her where she was going.

"I don't quite know," she said demurely. "At Nicolaieff they told me there was no such place as the station I wished to book for. As I had been told before that it was near X—— I took a ticket for that place, but I don't want to go there. My station must be before or after."

"What is the name of this unknown place?"

"Bielovka."

"Why, it's my station! Of course you can't book there. Why did n't your people tell you so? It's a 'half-station.' Takes no luggage—only a stopping-place put up for convenience. This train does n't stop there. We must change to-morrow morning. Your luggage will be all right if you don't lose the check. You can send for it afterwards, you know. But you must come with me. Whose estate are you going to?"

"Gortchnikoff's."

"H'm! Gortchnikoff's! Do you know them?"

"Only by letters."

"Well, you had better prepare yourself for shocks. The neighbouring squires have, with good reason, named the house 'The Yellow Castle.' Do you know what that means?"

"If 'Yellow House' is Russian for 'Bedlam,' 'Yellow Castle' must mean much the same thing."

"But what is 'Bedlam,' please?"

"A mad-house," explained Minnie, sweetly.

"Exactly so. But, I say, don't be frightened."

They are not dangerous, only very, very queer. It's best to be prepared, you know."

"I understand," said Minnie.

They passed the rest of the night in conversation which had in it very little of the personal element.

He described his travels in Italy, and she sang the praises of Devonshire, the Crimea, and the shores of the Black Sea. They spoke of literature, of Gorki, of course,—every one speaks of him nowadays,—of Tchékov, Andréiev, and Minski; of Semiradski and Viereschagine, the painters; of Antonkolski, the sculptor; of Anti-Semitism, of skating, of the Russian drama, of the joy of roasting chestnuts, of the Decimal Coinage, of Russian stoves, of Tolstoi's excommunication, of the *cuisine* of the different European nations, of students' riots, of the Italian Opera as compared with the Russian, of the life of the English workman, of the Russian peasantry, of the Eastern question, and many other things, including jams, horses, tennis, and Armenians.

"If you want to sleep, I'll go into the next compartment," Max said once or twice; but as both had slumbered in different trains the greater part of the day, they were not sleepy when in good company at last, and watched the winter dawn flush the white steppe with bright, wide-awake eyes.

They lunched, dined, drank tea, and tramped

the platforms of sleepy country stations together for a whole day, and parted at Bielovka feeling like old acquaintances; though, as Max remembered when he was driving home, they had told each other next to nothing about themselves.

“Why, I don’t even know her name, or why she is going to Gortchnikoff’s. As Leda’s companion and that lazy Marusia’s reader, I suppose. Not the right place for her.”

But what the right place was for her Max did not pretend to say.

CHAPTER IV

ACROSS THE FROZEN RIVER

WHEN Max reached home a pleasant surprise awaited him. The blue-bloused manservant, drawing back the heavy *portière*, disclosed the cosy, lighted hall, and Vèra sitting in a high-backed, carved chair, gazing at the flames licking the red logs.

Vèra always liked sitting in the hall. On either side of it were great oaken chests for the storing of precious furs, and between them a long polished table, at which, in grandmother's time, the maids sat stitching "Maximillian" and cocks and coronets on towels of fine linen. Nowadays, Stepàn's wife and daughter more prosaically mended the stockings, or polished the silver there, till Vèra sent them away to revel in solitude and heat.

Vèra's face was round and rosy and in no way remarkable; but her figure was superb, of the style some less-favoured, advanced women disdainfully term the "hour-glass type of figure," but which, uncompressed by corsets, can be clasped at the waist by the two hands, is broad

at the shoulders, with swelling bust and jutting hips. Even in her *coursiste's* blouse, grey skirt, and black apron, Vèra's figure was an artistic joy; but as she sat at ease in front of the fire, a long, straight tea-gown of white cloth edged with gold masked the suave lines, and the little head rising above the heavy folds looked like that of a child.

Max strode into the warm hall, closing the door upon the bitter wind of the steppe and the driving snow it scattered on the threshold. His cheeks were crimson, his moustache and eyebrows white and stiff with frost.

"What a cold kiss!" laughed Vèra as he greeted her. "So you've come at last! This is the third time I've sent the sledge. I've been here nearly a week waiting for you."

"And your Course?" asked Max, letting Stepàn pull him out of his heavy coat.

"I shall pass my exams. none the worse in the spring for having taken my holidays a month earlier than usual. Peter is unbearable in November."

She meant St. Petersburg. Russians never canonise their capital, and often speak of it familiarly as "Peter."

Max stretched his long limbs on one of the chests and sighed contentedly. It was good to be at home, especially when Vèra was there to welcome him.

"Bring the *samovar* into the study at once,"

he called after the retreating Stepàn. It is the *cri de cœur* of every true Russian coming home in the winter.

"How are mother and the Three Graces?" asked Vèra.

"Oh—as usual. Floria's growing pretty."

An English brother and sister could not have been more laconic, but each was conscious of the other's content.

Over his sixth glass of tea Max's tongue was loosened, and he spoke of many things, and among them his chance acquaintance of Ekaterinslav, but never a word of Anna Kriedlova. That little incident Vèra never knew, for Minnie did not speak of it either. She would have hated any one to tell tales of her.

"She is such a dear little thing," said Max, "and clever, too. Has read nearly everything in modern Russian literature. But—heavens!—if you heard how she speaks! I'm sure that in her own language her style must be graphic and picturesque, but nothing could beat her Russian for daring! Sometimes she begins a phrase quite correctly, to finish it with some startling slang or swear-word. As to grammar—she's far above it! Sometimes she simply uses the wrong word and puts everything out. She quoted a proverb yesterday. She said: 'Deaf priests don't eat dinner.' Can you guess what she meant?"

Vèra put down her cup, choking with laughter.

“‘For the deaf, priests say no mass,’” she corrected. “Oh, how delicious!”

“She ’ll brighten up even the ‘Yellow Castle,’ I bet my head,” declared Max, “though I never saw a woman so lacking in humour as M^ària Alexandrovna, except mother.”

“M^ària Alexandrovna and the girls are away, and won’t be back till the holidays. I called the other day and saw Seraphima Profirovna.”

“What an unheard-of honour!”

“She was in quite a rational mood, and very talkative. Did n’t give me her hand, of course, but was quite gracious to ‘that *coursiste*,’ as I hear she calls me. She told me M^ària Alexandrovna and Marusia both went into hysterics several times a day, and that after an almost unheard-of scene, even in that house of scenes, Vladimir Vladimirovich allowed them to go to town to undergo the hydropathic treatment the doctor advised.”

“Hydropathic treatment!” growled Max, who hated hysterical women with the hatred of an unfeeling male. “I ’d pour a pail of cold water over them if I were Vladimir Vladimirovich. For all his bluster he ’s weak with his women-folk, who, except Lydia, are more cracked than himself.”

“When you are married, if your wife has hysterics, you ’ll——”

“I?” Max sat up very straight, and stared. “Oh, come now, V^èra, don’t talk nonsense. I

don't want to think of marriage for years—most likely never. But if ever I do marry, my wife won't be hysterical, I'll answer for that. But, I say, what will that nice little girl do up at the 'Yellow Castle' with only the ogre and the witch? For the sake of the phrase, I must call Seraphima Profirovna a witch, but she isn't a bad old soul, after all, though queer as they make 'em. The whole place is queer enough to startle a stranger."

"I wish I could ask her over here," said Vèra. "But I don't see how I can. I can't very well ask the witch and the ogre to yield her up to me because my brother met her in the train."

"I tell you what," said Max, "I've a bright idea. Of course she'll skate. She said she liked it, and there'll be nothing else to do here. Even the bookcases will be locked at the 'Yellow Castle,' and the ogre will hug the keys in silent ecstasy. We'll skate up and down the river every day till we meet her. Then you must bring her home with you. It will be a change from Seraphima Profirovna, at all events, though we can't offer her much in the way of entertainment."

Two days afterwards, on a particularly splendid morning, when the steppe sparkled as if a diamond had fallen from the blue sky and been shattered over it, Max and Vèra, skating on the river, saw a solitary little figure making strange movements ahead.

"Is that your nice girl, I wonder?" said Vèra. "What is she doing?"

"I believe she 's sweeping or shovelling the snow away," Max declared, looking beneath his hand at the busy, stooping figure. "You wait here."

He shot off, swift as a swallow, and the first hint Minnie had of his approach was his voice saying, cheerily, "*Zdravstueté.*"

She turned from her occupation of shovelling away the snow with a child's garden spade picked up in the park.

"*Zdravstueté.* Don't hinder me, I 'm busy."

"What are you doing?"

"You see. Clearing a place to skate in. My box only arrived this morning, so I could n't get at my skates before."

Max did n't ask her why some one up at the house could not be found to do it for her. He knew the indoor servants dared not do so, and that the outdoor were hopelessly lazy, and generally asleep. Everything was in the most frightful disorder,—the stable full of unshod horses, restive for want of exercise, and the coach-house of carriages and sledges of every description, most of which were rotting uselessly away,—while the park and gardens were neglected and overgrown.

"Give up that Herculean labour and come and skate with us," he said. "Look. We have a space clear for a glorious spin. Where are your skates?"

She sat down on the bank to put them on, and he dropped on his knees.

"You may get up," she told him calmly. "I can't bear any one fumbling with my skates. Most probably you don't even understand the spring."

"Do you suppose you have the monopoly of 'Acmes'?" he demanded, keeping his lowly pose till she snapped the springs and sprang up.

"Come on," he said, holding out his hand, and they sped up the river, stumbling slightly as the snow lay thicker. Their fur-encircled faces were redder than actual beauty demands, but their bright eyes—bright with the frost and the mere joy of life it sends pricking through young veins—would have atoned for greater faults.

Max was scarcely handsome. As town acquaintances said regretfully, and his mother disdainfully, he looked so countrified. But it is not surprising that a man looks what he is, and as Max was nearly always in the open air, his face was brown and red—a not unbecoming blend of colour, after all, his eyes dewy, his mouth crimson beneath his dark moustache, and his teeth very white.

"*Krasnaiya dieva!*" (a red girl) said those whose taste he outraged. But Minnie found him nice to look at.

He wore a short fur-lined blue coat, *à la Polonaise*, fastened with looped black braid, a fur cap coming down over his ears, and, of course,

high boots. Minnie's jacket was only furred at the collar and cuffs; the lining was simply wadded; but the swift movement and her young, healthy blood kept her warm even in the midst of a Russian frost.

"Oh, please, what is your name?" asked Max, as they neared Vèra.

"Hermione Cordelia Carey."

"Goodness! You are afflicted in the same way as myself."

"I'm always simply 'Minnie,' or 'Miss Minnie,' in spite of the 'Hermione Cordelia.' Is n't it hideous? I was called so after two maiden ladies who were my godmothers, and from whom I was supposed to have expectations. They left their money—which was not much to leave—to some charitable society. Yet they christened me 'Hermione Cordelia.' "

"And I was always called 'Max,' even at the Gymnasium and the University, and you know it is n't the usual thing. But it seems our fate to be given particularly long names and called by particularly short ones. But tell me your surname again, please. I'm not used to English ones, you know."

Minnie repeated it, and he fixed it firmly in his memory, for on coming up to his sister he got through the ceremony of introduction without a hitch.

"Whoever *liked* who *liked* not at first sight?"

The revised version is truer than the original. Love between grown men and women is often a feeling of slow growth, and passion an overwhelming force flinging together those who before and after its tyranny stand aloof, misliking one another. But friendship—or at least the sympathy from which it springs—is of frank, free growth. Between Vèra and Minnie it sprang into life as the blue eyes and the brown met for the first time.

They cut figures on the ice, danced a realistic *pas de patineurs*, came to grief over an attempted quadrille for want of the five other dancers, and finally spun down the river, all three in a row, to the round-eyed admiration of a group of peasant boys.

"Half-past two," said Max at length, looking at the great gold repeater which had belonged to his grandfather. "And we came out before twelve. Time for tea. Don't you feel ready for it, Miss Carey?"

"We don't drink tea in the afternoon at the 'Yellow Castle.'"

"Don't I know it? There you will never behold a *samovar*. Only a teapot and a jug of hot water. In his infant days Vladimir Vladimirovich was scalded by a *samovar*. Now, in revenge, he refuses to look at one."

"But it does n't follow that he would be scalded now he is no longer an infant," laughed Minnie.

"Tell him so. By the way, have you seen him?"

"Not yet."

"Locked in his tower, is he? Well, you have still something to live for."

"Come to tea," said Vèra, "and you can tell Miss Carey all about the ogre at home. Of course you will come," she went on, turning to Minnie. "You have no excuse. We know you are all alone except for Seraphima Profirovna."

"And you're not dying to get back to her, are you?" asked Max, giving a hand to both girls, and pulling them up the bank.

Sitting on the somewhat shabby divan in the study, a glass of tea and a saucer of preserve on a low table beside her, Minnie told the story of her two lonely days in the "Yellow Castle" in her inimitable and untranslatable Russian.

"Everything is locked. I asked Seraphima Profirovna for a book. She said: 'The books are in the bookcases in my niece's rooms, and the rooms and the bookcases are locked.' I told her that it was so awfully hot in my room that I can't sleep. She said: 'You might have Fräulein's or Mademoiselle's room, but they are locked.' I asked if there was no piano. She said: 'Upstairs, but it is locked.'"

"There is one in Mária Alexandrovna's boudoir," put in Vèra; "but that room is a holy of holies, and even her daughters must cross the threshold with becoming awe."

"What else is locked?" asked Max.

"The front door, for one thing. I suppose you have never been in the back way. It is tremendously long, and reminds me of Walter Scott's novels."

"Why on earth?" laughed Vèra.

"The passages are so dreadfully long and mysteriously dark, while such light as there is falls through barred, round windows—what do you call them in Russian? And at times I come upon a man lighting a stove. The flame shoots up, and illuminates his dark face, the arched passage, and the padlocked doors, and I feel blooming creepy."

Max leant back in his chair shaking with laughter, in which Vèra joined.

"What *are* you laughing at?" said Minnie. She used the familiar "thou," which set Max off again.

"I really beg your pardon," he said at last, trying to look contrite, though his eyes were brimming with laughter. "But the end of your sentence did n't go with the beginning at all."

"I said something awful, I suppose," sighed Minnie, resignedly. "I often do. But it is not possible to shut up the whole time, you bet. But I have such a ——" (here she used a very strong word indeed) "accent in French that I chuck it altogether except as regards literature."

"I love to hear you speak Russian, really,"

Max assured her. And indeed her soft slurring of *tschs* and *shs* was pleasant to the ear, while the refined voice uttering slang, bad grammar, and swear-words in laboriously composed sentences tickled his sense of humour. "What were you saying about the back way? Russians call it the *black* way."

"Only that it is dreadfully long, with endless flights of steps. One up and two down. And imagine!—the footman must bring every course for lunch and dinner right across the court and through those endless corridors and up the steps. The dishes are not covered, so no wonder they are cold. Why is n't the kitchen in the house itself? There's room enough and to spare."

"Oh, that's Vladimir Vladimirovich all over," said Vèra. "The house was built when we were children, from a plan of the castle of the German emperor's brother or uncle, as Seraphima Profirovna is fond of telling everybody. Of course, what is convenient for a German prince with a properly regulated staff of servants and retainers is decidedly inconvenient when, as in the 'Yellow Castle,' there are only three or four indoor servants, and they are always going away. Vladimir Vladimirovich won't keep more."

"Is he so stingy?" asked Minnie.

"It is difficult to say. He will throw away hundreds one day and make a fuss about a *kopek* the next. In some things he is extravagant, in

others stingy. Take the house, for example. A great place like that must have cost a fortune, yet it's an uncomfortable barracks. More than half shut-up or unfinished. Yet he's always denouncing 'parade.' Says he loves a simple life, and that two house-servants are quite enough for any one. He's always grumbling at having to keep a footman and a *chef*."

"What did he build such a barracks for, then?" demanded Minnie. "As if two servants could keep up that place!"

"That's just it. Ask him. Perhaps he knows why he built it. Nobody else does."

"How do you get on with Seraphima Profir-ovna?" asked Vèra.

"Pretty well. She's not half bad, really. But what on earth is she always afraid of?"

"Dogs."

"But there are none in the house! Yet she goes about with her hands held high for fear of touching anything; never opens a door herself, screams if any one comes near enough to brush against her dress, and eats with her elbows stuck up in the air for fear of touching the table-cloth. You know her ways, I suppose. What is she afraid of?"

"Dogs," repeated Max. "Vicariously afraid of them."

"But——" said Minnie, perplexedly.

"Don't you see that all the things she is afraid

to touch have been touched by people who have touched dogs or whom dogs have touched."

"Poor old lady! She must be mad on that one point."

"And a few others," added Max, cheerily. "However, as you say, she's not a bad old soul. A queer type, though, but so are they all. You'll witness some strange scenes in the 'Yellow Castle.' Don't be frightened at anything."

"And remember," said Vèra, "that if things get too impossible, you have only to cross the river and come to us. I should be glad of a little practice in English."

"Oh! do you speak English?" cried Minnie, delightedly.

"A little," said Vèra, in that language. "And Max, too."

"And I've been talking my frightful Russian! Oh, why did n't you tell me?"

"Go on in Russian," said Max, setting the example. "We've both more than half-forgotten the little English we once knew."

And they talked of many things besides the "Yellow Castle," till Minnie rose to go.

Of course Max went with her across the river. The short winter day was closing in, and it was colder than ever, while the glimmer had gone out of the snow except where the light fell upon it from the windows. Max and Minnie walked quickly, their frozen breath making a delicate

tracery on their fur collars. They spoke little. The snowy silence hushed them. The whole white world seemed tense with mute waiting for the night.

"*Au revoir*," said Max, as they reached the "Yellow Castle" grounds. "We skate nearly every morning. Hope we shall see you again very soon. To-morrow I shall be on the lookout for you. You might as well give us your company till your pupils come. Why not make the best of your freedom? Oh, I say, that sounds as if I thought no end of my sister and myself! But you understand what I mean, don't you? And I may presume without conceit that we are better company for you than Seraphima Profirovna."

"I should rather think so! *Au revoir*, Maximilian Ardilionovich."

"Oh, I say—how you drew that out! I have an English acquaintance in Petersburg who always calls me 'Mr. Max.' Can't you do the same?"

"I like high-sounding names, like yours, in full." Her laugh floated back to him, so quickly had she moved away. The whitened trees looming through the dusk hid her from sight in an instant. Max turned homewards.

"Well, is n't she a dear little thing?" he asked Vèra on his return. "Now I understand what 'laughing eyes' mean. Hers often laugh."

"And sometimes they are sad."

“Do you think so? I did n't notice it. But her Russian! Oh, Vèrushka, did you hear her say ‘candlestick’ for ‘priest,’ and ‘cakes’ for ‘crime,’ and ‘crime’ for ‘cakes’?”

Laughter seized him again.

Vèra sat looking at the fire.

“I tell you her eyes are sad,” she said.

CHAPTER V

THE OGRE

TO Seraphima Profirovna's great satisfaction, Minnie changed her dress before entering the dining-room. Disregarding the non-arrival of the girl's box, the old lady had made her a scene every evening. "If you don't keep a dress only for walking, I can't—I really can't—stay in the same house with you," she exclaimed excitedly. "It is beyond my power. I cannot. For the very Creator's sake, keep away from me!"

Minnie, though quite in the dark as to the cause of the old lady's fright until Max's explanation, sought with soft answers to turn away her wrath, believing this to be the best method to adopt with people of doubtful intellect. But, as she discovered later on, firmness, even rudeness, was the best policy with Seraphima Profirovna. The more she was humoured the worse she became, while sharpness kept her vagaries in check. The servants were quicker to see this than Minnie, and sometimes used scant ceremony with the poor old soul.

"You leave me in peace, Seraphima Profirovna," the consumptive footman would say when

goaded past endurance. "You are not my mistress, glory be to God!"

The old lady was snoring in her crimson arm-chair when Minnie entered the dining-room. Her cap was very far back and pushed to one side, her legs stretched out and far apart, with a more liberal view of white stockings than ever. She looked so grotesque that Minnie felt quite sorry for her.

"Am I to serve the dinner, *barishna?*" asked the footman in a hollow, resigned voice from his stand by the sideboard.

"Ask Seraphima Profirovna when she wakes up," said Minnie, knowing that the decision was a weighty one.

Seraphima Profirovna gave a louder snore, followed by a gasp, sat up, and said: "Have you called Vladimir Vladimirovich, Efime?"

"Three times, Seraphima Profirovna. He does not answer."

"Go upstairs and knock at the tower door again. Knock many times."

This command was part of the usual ceremony, Efime generally going up to the tower half a dozen times in vain before Seraphima Profirovna decided to dine without her nephew.

Efime went resignedly, but not in vain this time. On his return he said, with a gleam of triumph penetrating his weariness, "Vladimir Vladimirovich says he will be down soon."

Minnie did not hear the sentence unmoved. At length she was to see the ogre of the "Yellow Castle" face to face. She pictured a gaunt and shrivelled-looking man, wan with poring over books and instruments. Max had told her that the ogre was interested in mechanics, and that the tower was full of phonographs, gramophones, telephones, curious clocks, patent padlocks, and cabinets with ingenious springs. The man whose passion for experiment led him to disregard the rules of ordinary life, and to sleep and eat at all sorts of odd, capricious, and extraordinary hours must have the tense, strained look of the monomaniac.

"Thank Heaven you have changed your dress!" said Seraphima Profirovna, breaking in upon her thoughts. Russians are always devout in speech and explicit in their thanks; but the continual repetition of the *Gloria in Excelsis* is apt to pall.

In her trailing black dress with its touches of blue, Minnie looked dainty to fragility. Her usually rosy face was very pale now that the flush of exercise had faded from it, and there were bluish circles round her eyes. She had not passed a good night since her arrival, and was determined to insist upon changing her room. As Seraphima Profirovna was quite powerless to aid her, she meant to appeal to the ogre himself. Surely any one in their senses must understand that it is impossible to roast people in their beds night after night. "In their right senses." There was the

rub. Minnie remembered she was in the "Yellow Castle," and grew doubtful.

But at sight of the ogre her hopes revived. He looked so very rational, even genial. His dress was not that usually worn by gentlemen in the evening, but Russians are not so particular as Englishmen about such trifles. The belted holland blouse and broad, holland "inexpressibles" stuffed into high boots even became him. There was a certain frank dignity in his manner. He was a man of splendid physique; tall, broad-shouldered, with a magnificent brown beard falling to his belt like the heroes of old Russian ballads, thick, wavy hair of the same colour but dashed with grey, and restless grey eyes.

Minnie felt nothing but surprise. This then was the dreaded ogre, whose shouts of "Fool—fool—fool!" woke her from her short and restless sleep. He was certainly very pale, or rather yellow, as he never went out, and rigorously excluded every breath of fresh air from the house, but otherwise he was a very fair specimen of a middle-aged Russian country gentleman.

"Miss Carey, I presume?" he said, advancing with outstretched hand. "I very much regret my wife's absence. You must be very dull here, I am afraid."

The greeting increased Minnie's surprise. It was uttered in English so perfect that she could scarcely believe the speaker to be a foreigner.

He turned to the end of the long table where *zakouska* was laid out. Piquant pickled mushrooms, caviare, salted herrings, sardines, and other dainties for whetting the appetite, with, of course, a bottle of *vodka* surrounded by tiny glasses.

"You don't eat *zakouska*, I suppose?" said Vladimir Vladimirovich, spreading caviare on a piece of black bread and eating it standing.

"Oh, yes, I do! I have grown to like it," said Minnie, following his example, while Seraphima Profirovna went to her own place and ordered the footman to pour her out a glass of *vodka*. She never touched the bottle herself, and of course the glass was her especial property.

The ogre looked at Minnie not unfavourably. The ease of her manner pleased him. He was accustomed to governesses who walked softly and in fear and trembling. The long succession of mostly middle-aged females who had passed before him since the birth of his eldest daughter had been mortally afraid of him, with the exception of one audacious and coarsely pretty creature who had tried the softening influence of her eyes. So, at least, it had seemed to Maria Alexandrovna, who promptly discharged her.

There was nothing audacious in Minnie's self-possession, which was not so absolute as it seemed. She was naturally shy, though years spent among strangers had taught her to overcome the feeling, and had increased her unself-consciousness. As

she spoke English, she was at her best with Vladimir Vladimirovich.

The ogre took his place at the head of the table, where his plate was surrounded by bottles of pepsine and other remedies for indigestion, and an array of cold dishes.

"What's all this?" he asked the footman, in a voice so utterly unlike the gentlemanly tones in which he had addressed her that Minnie was not surprised that the man started.

"Your Excellency——"

Vladimir Vladimirovich laid down his *serviette*, and, turning, stared at the shaking servant.

"*What?*" he demanded.

"Vladimir Vladimirovich——"

"Ah, that's better. How many times have I told you, you fool, that my name is Vladimir Vladimirovich? Call Mária Alexandrovna 'Your Excellency.'—She likes it. I don't. I know quite well I'm excellent without your telling me so every minute. Understand?"

Of course the man was a new-comer. The servants always were new-comers at the "Yellow Castle."

"What's all this?" repeated Vladimir Vladimirovich, waving his hand toward the cold dishes.

"Your lunch and yesterday's dinner, Vladimir Vladimirovich. You told me never to clear it away until you told me."

In fact, cold dishes accumulated round Vladimir

Vladimirovich's plate until he came in the night to demolish them.

"Ah," he said, as if suddenly remembering his own commands. "But take them away now. I don't want them."

Seraphima Profirovna sat as usual with her elbows raised high above the table-cloth. She was a garrulous old soul, and was soon telling her nephew about Minnie's meeting with "the duchess's son."

"So you've made an acquaintance already," he said to Minnie. "So much the better for you." Then changing his tone and language: "What do you do to amuse Miss Carey, aunt?"

"I talk to her. She speaks Russian. She's a clever little thing." And Seraphima Profirovna pointed her fork at Minnie and smiled.

"So you really speak Russian? That's rare for a foreigner who has not lived here half his or her life. What does my aunt talk to you about?"

"All sorts of things," replied Minnie, who, if she had been more explicit, would have said, "Endless tales about her relations prefaced by their genealogy and connections by marriage."

She was so delighted at being able to speak English freely that, to her own surprise, she was soon talking to the ogre as easily as she had talked to Max. He was not in the least ogreish, laughed frequently, and was occasionally witty. He had been to America, the birthplace of the phonograph

and similar inventions, and the proud conservatism of the Russian noble of the old school was strangely blended in him with a respect for the workman, a scorn of luxury, and that dislike of outward show of which his clothes and the manner in which he preferred to be addressed bore evidence. Yet there was the pretentious, uncomfortable house he had built as a living testimony against him.

"My wife likes parade," he told Minnie. "When she comes home she will be sure to make a fuss because I have sent away the *chef* and one of the footmen. This dinner is cooked by one of the village women. It's quite good enough for me." (In fact, if it had not been cold it would have been quite eatable.) "I would never have a fellow in livery yawning behind my chair, but my wife can't live without a footman. She goes into hysterics at the mere suggestion, and then my eldest daughter follows suit for company. There are generally two when she is here—footmen, I mean. That is, when they stay, which is never for long. The rascals! I keep a tight hand over them. I must, or the *canaille* presume. Our lower orders are no better than animals, and since the Emancipation have grown unmanageable. My father kept them in order with the knout. I wish I could. Why do you look at me like that? Don't you agree with me?"

"That the knout is the best way of ruling servants? Of course not."

The ogre looked at the serious little face in surprise, and then laughed. Contradiction was quite new to him. Those around him feared, disliked, and flattered him. His wife rebelled and cringed alternately. No one guessed that most of his eccentricity was the effect of a restless, active nature chafing against a spoilt, cramped life. He barely understood it himself. Why should his life be spoilt? He was very rich, exceptionally so, for Russia. His income was fifteen thousand pounds a year. Yet everything had gone wrong with him. At heart, the terrible ogre of the "Yellow Castle" was an unhappy and lonely man. His bluster misled people, his wife most of all. He hated deceit, and his whole household—except Lydia—lied and cringed to him, so that he grew more and more exacting, more exasperating and exasperated, more violent as time went on. And their fear increased with his violence. None of the family had sufficient intuition to adopt the simple course of quiet openness which might have kept him rational.

"You are very liberal, I suppose," he said to Minnie, with a laugh that was half a sneer. The word has a broader sense in Russian.

"I am a sentimental Radical," declared Minnie, calmly.

"What may that mean, please?" inquired the ogre, with a touch of amused interest.

"We were talking politics one evening, my

friends in Odessa and I. And one of them—a student who knows me very well—told me that my Radicalism is merely sentimentality; that I like the sound of the words ‘liberty,’ the ‘people,’ ‘progress,’ ‘equality,’ but do not realise their meaning; that at heart—or at least in taste—I am an aristocrat, and that contact with ‘the people’ would soon cure me of my sentimental Radicalism. He was very severe,” added Minnie, soberly.

“And right?”

“I don’t know,” said Minnie, slowly. “Perhaps. I know that I hate the very idea of injustice; that I feel that all men should at least start in life equally; that I detest cringing and flunkeyism, and thank my stars I was not born in a Court. But I can’t bear the contact of the crowd; if in a tram or train a not overclean man ‘of the people’ sits next to me, I suffer ridiculous but very real torment. I try to persuade myself that it is the dirt—not the man—I dislike; but I’m a snob, I suppose, though theoretically I hate snobbishness. I can’t bear going third-class, for example.”

“The student who called you a ‘sentimental Radical’ no doubt always goes third-class, and is of the people.”

“On the contrary,” laughed Minnie, “he is a *dvorianin*.”

“Oh, a *leachnie* (personal), or the son of one, I

suppose. I call them *leashnie*" (unnecessary). Vladimir Vladimirovich chuckled over his own pun.

"No—hereditary. I understand your social system, you see. But he always goes third from choice, and because there is n't a fourth-class."

Vladimir Vladimirovich chuckled again.

Seraphima Profirovna looked from one to the other in surprise. She was proud of her nephew's fluency in English, and astonished—almost shocked—at Minnie's manner. How could that little slip of a thing dare to chatter in such a way with him before whom every one else trembled?

"Why don't you take wine?" asked Vladimir Vladimirovich of Minnie.

"I don't like it."

"Not any sort?"

"Only champagne," said Minnie, smiling.

"Efime, go to the cellar and bring up half a dozen of champagne," commanded the ogre.

"And the keys, Vladimir Vladimirovich?"

He fumbled in his capacious pockets, producing a tremendous jingle, and drew out a large, labelled key.

"But——" began Minnie.

Vladimir Vladimirovich waved his hand.

"There's plenty of champagne in my cellar. Bought to drink, I presume. I like it, too, but can't bear to drink alone. They call me a drunkard, among other things. I dare swear that

young Galovkine gave me a nice character. Now did n't he? Tell me what he said. The truth, mind."

There was a note of the typical ogre in the imperiousness of his voice.

"If I can't speak the truth I prefer to be silent," said Minnie, by no means daunted.

"Ha—ha! Well answered. But come, what did he say?"

"He said you were a *chudak*." Minnie, vexed at being driven into a corner, turned at bay with the Russian word which means something between a madman and an eccentric.

"Ha—ha! Very good. Do you think I don't know that they call me worse names? A madman, a drunkard, but not a 'bitter drunkard,' as we Russians say. Do you know what that means? A man who locks himself in his room and drinks till he's dead drunk. I can't drink alone. I never get really drunk, either. Never lose my head. So I'm a '*chudak*,' am I, young Galovkine? Ha—ha! Very good. You fool, you, why don't you fetch the champagne?" This to the footman who stood behind his master's chair, evidently screwing up his courage to ask something.

"How many bottles did you order, Vladimir Vladimirovich?"

"Six, idiot. Lively!"

"You made me tell you," protested Minnie.

“Do you think I am offended? Not in the least! I know what my neighbours think of me. They are welcome to their thoughts. Are you sure he did n't say anything worse?” he demanded with such a sudden change from superb indifference to eager interest that Minnie was very glad to be able to say truthfully,—“No, really.”

Efime returned with the champagne, and the sparkling liquor put Vladimir Vladimirovich into a good temper and made him more talkative than ever. He was quite vexed with Seraphima Profirovna and Minnie for drinking only one glass each.

“The bottle will be wasted and must go to Efime. Stale champagne is disgusting. Come, Miss Carey, another glass.”

He refilled her glass in spite of her protests, but nothing would induce Minnie to do more than sip it.

“And you said you liked champagne!” he said petulantly.

“So I do, in moderation. Two glasses will only give me a headache and make me sleepy.”

“Only sleepy? Then you need not be afraid. What's to hinder your sleeping? If it made you too talkative now, I could understand your caution. Ha—ha! The tales men have told me over the bottle! Last year I sat up all night with my brother-in-law and an officer who had come down here after my daughter's dowry, which he

wrongly supposes to be worth coming after. He 's vastly mistaken. The estates shall go to my son, and my daughters shall receive their legal portion of my fortune when I am dead, and I don't mean to die yet if I can help it. If a man wants my daughter, let him take her as she is; if he wants money, let him go to the devil or the Jews. I'll tell André Andréévich so if he comes here again. Well, he boasted that no man in the Guards could equal him in the matter of steady drinking, that he never made a fool of himself, never lost his head! Ha—ha! And at four o'clock in the morning he was sleeping with his head on his arms among the bottles after having talked no end of rot, wept, kissed me, and tried to throttle my brother-in-law for some fancied slight. Ha—ha! And Féodor Petrovich was sick."

"How horrid!" said Minnie, sipping daintily at her champagne. She had a vivid imagination, and the picture of a sleepy, maudlin officer, a sick Féodor Petrovich, and the ogre sitting grimly between them with a Mephistophelian grin upon his sallow face did not appeal to her taste.

"Why 'horrid'? Come now, you're severe. Drunkenness is not such a crime, after all."

"I don't see the pleasure of it. Is it worth the headache?"

"Oh—you understand nothing about it, I see," he said vexedly, as if her want of comprehension was to be deplored. "I think no worse of a man

who gets drunk occasionally. Rather the reverse. I said so once to our village priest. He can't stand two glasses, and was determined not to drink that evening. I made him, though. Ha—ha! Well, he told me a moral tale of a man who argued that wine need not be avoided, like gambling and the other distraction which must be nameless in your presence. They are undoubted vices, he argued, but drinking is venal. Well, he got drunk and committed the other two sins in his drunkenness. Ha—ha! But that's just because he was n't strong enough to keep his head. I never lose mine. Don't be afraid, Miss Carey."

"I am afraid of nothing," said Minnie, with a touch of haughtiness.

When a miniature woman speaks in a tone of icy clearness, it is more effective than all the dignity of her taller and more commanding sisters.

The ogre chuckled, but the gentleman was quick to see that his conversation was not to the taste of his young listener, and he changed the subject deftly.

Minnie wanted to introduce the subject of changing her room, and at length managed to touch upon it.

"So you're roasted, are you?" laughed the ogre. "You English are always so afraid of heat. It won't kill you. My son complains of the same thing when he's home. He has to put up with

it. He won't melt. Neither will you. You 'll soon get used to it."

"I never can," said Minnie. "I have not slept properly since I came, and last night I nearly fainted twice. I was obliged to go and sit in the hall. I really cannot remain in that room. Seraphima Profirovna spoke of Mademoiselle's. Can't I sleep there till she returns? Then we can see what is to be done."

"Mademoiselle's room is locked," said the ogre, decisively.

"Could n't it be unlocked?"

Vladimir Vladimirovich frowned, but Minnie looked so sweetly unconscious of having given offence that he relaxed.

"You are a very persistent little person," he said.

"I must be. I shall be really ill if I sleep in that room."

"Well, look here. I can't give you Mademoiselle's room, or my wife will be vexed. I never interfere with the governesses. But at present you are simply my guest, and if you say your health suffers I must see what can be done. My steward is married and has a family; there's no room in his house. But there's a pavilion built for guests in the park. Some of the rooms are furnished. If you're not afraid, sleep there. You must arrange with one of the stable lads about heating the stove. I can't interfere in that

matter. It must be your own affair. Are you afraid to live there?"

"Give me the key, please," said Minnie.

There was another fumbling and jingling in pocket depths, which produced another large, labelled key.

"Thank you," said Minnie, taking it. "I will move into my new quarters to-morrow."

"I don't know if my wife will wish you to remain there. You must settle that between you when she returns."

Minnie was too thankful at the thought of present escape from her nightly torment to worry about what might happen a few weeks hence.

Then the conversation broadened into generalities again. Seraphima Profirovna had left the table and was slumbering in her crimson chair. Minnie made a movement as if to follow her example, but the ogre motioned her to remain.

"I can't bear having no one to talk to over my wine," he said, like a great, petulant boy. "Please sit down and be sociable. My wife has turned the whole house into a nursery and schoolroom since the children were born. She ought to have been a governess herself, or a *dame de classe*. She is wild when I tell her so, but it's quite true. I married her when she had barely finished at the Institute. She knows nothing of life but what she saw there and here. But, all the same, most women expand. She does n't. She's nothing

but a middle-aged *Instituteka* now. She makes every one round her uncomfortable, and has rules and maxims for every minute of the day. I simply hate living by rule, so I keep away from it all. You seem a nice, natural girl. Don't be stiff and governess-like with me. Sit down and give me practice in English."

Minnie felt obliged to obey, and resumed her seat not unwillingly. The ogre interested her.

"We 've had women here," he went on, "who pretended to speak English. I could n't understand their jargon. My wife's no judge, and believed their recommendations more than me, so I washed my hands of them. My daughters speak a queer mixture of German, French, and English, which they fondly imagine to be purely the last. I have not spoken it for ages. But, now I can do so to a rational being who understands me, I am anxious to improve the occasion."

He did so, and they spoke of various matters, touching at length upon chess.

"Oh, do you play?" exclaimed the ogre, boyishly, starting up. "I have n't had a partner since our last deacon was promoted to a living. My wife plays abominably, without the least interest, and so evidently just because she thinks it is her duty when I ask her that. I don't now. I've given it up."

"I don't play very well," said Minnie, "but I like it."

Vladimir Vladimirovich dived into his pockets again. Fishing up a great key, he applied it to one of the doors in the room and disappeared, returning shortly afterwards with a beautiful set of ivory chessmen.

The footman appeared at the door leading to the hall.

“Am I to clear away, Vladimir Vladimirovich?”

“Go to the devil!” thundered his master. Then to Minnie, in quite a different voice: “I hate these fellows poking about here!”

He put the board down upon the white tablecloth, and set up the men.

When Seraphima Profirovna opened her eyes, she scarcely believed the evidence of her senses.

The “little slip of a girl” was playing chess with Vladimir Vladimirovich, and both were absorbed in the game. The ogre’s face was full of quick, almost boyish interest.

“Checkmate!” he exclaimed triumphantly, at length. “Well, Miss Carey, you understand nothing about wine, but you can play chess. Don’t you want your revenge?”

CHAPTER VI

A TRAGEDY

THE next day Max and Vèra looked for Minnie on the river in vain. She was busy changing her quarters. The pavilion was situated close to one of the bridges in the park, and its green shutters and verandah gave it the air of some creature of the summer shivering on the banks of the frozen river, surrounded by the ghostly white trees. It was terribly cold inside, and Minnie had need of all her eloquence to persuade the lazy stable lad to heat the narrow corridor and her room for twenty-five *kopecks*.

“I will give you a rouble every month if you heat the stoves properly,” she said. “But no work—no pay.”

This practical maxim sounded better than a confession of her poverty. If she had owned that that twenty-five-kopeck piece was her widow's mite, she might have commanded her reluctant servitor in vain. As it was, her loftily expressed promise, her prettiness, and her manner of easy command wrought the desired effect at last, and she arranged her effects in a room tolerably warm,

though very small, and furnished with only the barest necessaries, it being only intended as a sleeping-place for the short summer nights. The window gave her the most concern. As it was neither double, sealed, nor wadded, the wind rattled through it draughtily. She cut up an old petticoat, nailed the flannel in strips round the frame, and poked wadding, coaxed from Akulina, into the crevices. A shawl to be hung across it at night and festooned back in the daytime completed her arrangements, and she felt she could sleep in peace, with no fear of suffocation and very little of catching cold. In fact, as time went on and the daily heating dried and warmed the crazy little house, it became quite habitable.

Satisfied at length, she drew the wobbly table close to the stove and began a letter to her once dearest friend and late pupil, whose marriage had necessitated her journey to the "Yellow Castle."

Minnie lived from day to day with bright courage which seemed very like sheer thoughtlessness worthy of the birds of the air or the lilies of the field. She herself had once said, in answer to an accusation of improvidence on the part of her friend's mother, that she lived like a true Christian, taking "no thought for the morrow, for the morrow shall take thought for the things of itself." In reality a cold fear gripped her heart at the thought of the future. But she chased

away foreboding with the philosophical reflection that worrying does no good. As long as she had her board and lodging in exchange for a lesson with Olga Petrova, she did not fret unreasonably if outside lessons were few and badly paid. She did her best to find them, advertised, went the round of the agencies, and waited with serene gaiety, living "like a Christian." But the previous summer had been particularly unprofitable as regards money. The Petroff's *datcha* was somewhat isolated, and she had but one pupil, a young married lady, who had come southward from an inland town for the sea-baths, and who went back without paying her English teacher. Minnie's dress for her friend's wedding encroached upon her remaining twenty roubles, the last of which was completely swallowed up by her journey to the "Yellow Castle." She might have gone third, receiving second-class expenses with her first month's salary, as had been arranged; but she was not yet broken in to such subterfuges. Even the hard lessons of poverty could not render her sordidly practical. Nothing can soil or materialise a sunbeam. Minnie's nature was, as it were, impregnated with sunshine.

She was absolutely independent. Her sisters were married and in England, her parents dead. The whole wide world was before her, like the life that seems likely to be so endlessly long at twenty. Old age seems fabulously far off, and if ever

Minnie thought of it she always reflected calmly that death might come before. When she had told Vladimir Vladimirovich that she was afraid of nothing, she used no empty words. Gentle, feminine, and dainty as she seemed, her chief characteristic was absolute fearlessness. Danger steadied her nerves, and she faced it with a smile, as she faced life itself and her uncertain future.

Loneliness is crushing, but its grip had not been heavy upon her as yet. She had always made friends and had believed in their sincerity. Olga had given her the first sharp taste of disillusion. The girl, deeply in love, had during her engagement seemed to regard Minnie as merely a figure in that past life, before *he* came, which counted for so little now. The realisation, striking at her heart, had opened an older and deeper wound, which bled dolorously now as she sat in the queer little green house writing to Olga. The pen dropped from her fingers, she leant back in the creaking chair, staring unseeingly at the white park outside. The eyes Max had found illustrative of the adjective "laughing" were very wistful now.

And Max himself, skating with his sister, found that somehow the steppe was not so sparkling today, nor the air so exhilarating, nor the sky so blue.

By the time Minnie had finished her letter and her musings the cold winter sunlight had died away, and the dusk made the white park look

more ghostly than ever. She changed her dress, thrust her slippered feet into her snow-boots, put on her jacket, and, throwing a shawl over her head, ran over to the great house, going in by the endless "black" way, which had seemed so mysterious to her on the night of her arrival in the "Yellow Castle."

As she entered the hall, the sound of voices floated across it from the dining-room,—Vladimir Vladimirovich's laugh, Seraphima Profirovna's drawl, and a strange, hoarse cackle. A youngish man, with blue eyes twinkling in a very red face, rose from his chair at Minnie's entrance, and bowed with a clink of spurs. She was not yet sufficiently versed in the mysteries of the ubiquitous Russian uniform to know what he was at sight, yet not so ignorant as to take every man with epaulets, sword, and spurs for an officer in the army. In point of fact the visitor was the *stanovoy*, a police officer, from the neighbouring district town.

He was seated at the end of the table making raids upon the *zakouska*, while an empty glass of *vodka* and a full one of champagne accounted for the more than natural red of his cheeks and the brightness of his ever twinkling eyes.

Vladimir Vladimirovich treated him with a familiarity which, for all its seeming geniality, did not succeed in putting him quite at his ease. The *stanovoy* was a man of some perspicacity, and,

though a new-comer in the neighbourhood, had heard enough of the ogre to be on his guard; and indeed Vladimir Vladimirovich's temper was most uncertain. He would treat a so-called inferior like a brother one minute and the next "slay him with his noble birth." All his neighbours had cause for offence against him, and, for the most part, gave the "Yellow Castle" a wide berth, leaving its master to the solitude he sometimes savagely sought and at others as savagely rebelled against. He never returned calls; would literally fall upon his visitors' necks one day, and not issue from his tower to greet them the next.

The *stanovoy*, being wise in his generation, and having once got through his business, listened rather than talked. An officer of justice, summoned from a district town to exercise his powers of discrimination in a village, calls upon the squire as a matter of form. The *stanovoy* had hoped that Vladimir Vladimirovich would refuse to receive him, and not even the very excellent champagne he was drinking caused him to rejoice at the favour with which he was met. He preferred his ease above everything. Used to command a small body of subordinates, and to be commanded by those whose authority he respected, he disliked being with this squire of the steppe, rich, and of ancient family, whose jovial good-nature scarcely concealed his scorn for the police

and every other profession which a "noble" rarely patronises. The parish doctor, a young man fresh from the University, had felt much the same as the *stanovoy*, but had resented it far more openly, and had soon come to an open rupture with the ogre, thus depriving himself of indifferent lunches and first-rate champagne.

"Let him rot in his tower, the *chudak!*" the doctor said hotly, when Vladimir Vladimirovich was discussed. "He's eaten up with pride and self-sufficiency. Mad—simply mad! A family of degenerates. He thinks himself a *grand seigneur*, and is nothing but a simple squire, richer than most, and more pig-headedly ignorant than any. *Grand seigneur*, indeed! Well, if France boasted many such at the time of the Revolution, the Terror was but their deserts."

But the *stanovoy*, lacking the confidence of an educated man, drank the ogre's champagne and put up with his manner.

He had been called to the village to inquire into the cause of the sudden and suspicious death of a man who, after being in the service of the Gortch-nikoffs for twenty years, had been discharged by Vladimir Vladimirovich on his father's death.

"Yes," said the ogre, with a sigh, "he was my father's valet, and seemed a good servant in those days. But when I became master I found him simply impossible. The fellow presumed. I must be master in my own house, you know. I was

really obliged to discharge him. A pity, really a pity. But I cannot stand presumption."

The *stanovoy* assented, at the same time shrewdly guessing that the man's "presumption" had consisted in objecting to the names bestowed upon him by Vladimir Vladimirovich. Even a valet may turn, and "thrice-cursèd fool" provokes a wriggle.

"And so there 's a suspicion of foul play?" said Vladimir Vladimirovich. "Who profits by his death, though? Only his wife; as they have no children, I suppose the money goes to her. Nice, snug sum for a peasant. I'll be bound the rascal cheated my father out of half of it. And so you really think it was poison?"

"Oh—God knows. How can I tell? The doctor says that it's a strange case, but there are plenty of strange cases. He was well the day before yesterday and dead last night. But there are always mushrooms."

"Not in winter," Vladimir Vladimirovich reminded him.

"Pickled. Well, he's dead and will be buried to-morrow. I have no time to make a fuss about a dead peasant. Poor fellow! Well, we must all die!"

With this philosophical reflection the *stanovoy* drained his glass and changed the subject, while Minnie sat astonished at this glimpse of steppe justice.

"My brother met with an accident the other day," said the *stanovoy*, evidently seeking a subject for conversation, yet as evidently wishing to take his leave. "A dog attacked and bit him in X——." He named the government town. "Of course, there is no saying——"

He got no farther. Seraphima Profirovna rose to her feet with a shriek, staggered for a moment, and then rushed from the room with a swiftness not to be expected from her years and bulk.

"What is the matter?" gasped the *stanovoy*.

"You've frightened my aunt out of her wits. Nothing more. Ha—ha!" laughed Vladimir Vladimirovich. "She's probably in hysterics now, with Akulina to soothe her. No—no—you've no need to go to her, Miss Carey; she won't let you touch her, you know. Sit down. You must excuse the poor old lady, *gospodin stanovoy*, she's not quite right, and on the subject of dogs mad—quite mad."

The *stanovoy* rose to his feet. "I must be going," he said. "My sledge has been waiting long enough. Good-bye, and thank you, Vladimir Vladimirovich."

He went off by the back way. Vladimir Vladimirovich would not unlock the front door for any one less than a neighbouring squire; and when in a misanthropic mood would let even him ring fruitlessly till he rode away in a rage, vowing he would never again visit the "Yellow Castle."

“Here’s a tragedy!” the ogre said to Minnie as the *stanovoy* disappeared. “My aunt will be in fits for a week. First she will order a thorough purification of the room where a man whose brother has been bitten by a dog has sat. I’m off to my tower to keep out of it all till dinner.”

He left the room laughing, and presently, in fulfilment of his prophecy, Akulina and Efime entered, armed with brooms and dusters, and Minnie retreated to her late bedroom and place of torment. Just as she was thinking that the hall would prove a far cooler shelter from the dust-storm in the dining-room, Seraphima Profirovna called to her through the half-open door.

“My dove, go and see that they really clean the room properly. That wretch Akulina will most surely lie and forswear herself, and Efime is as lazy as the devil.” (She evidently considered that the ruining of men’s souls calls for but slight exertion.) “Sprinkle this eau-de-Cologne about the room. It will purify it. Come and take it. You know I can’t open the door myself.”

Minnie advanced into the inner room. Seraphima Profirovna sat in an easy-chair, trembling and flushed, holding out a large bottle. She was evidently too upset to remember that Minnie touched dogs, and therefore should not be allowed to cross the threshold of her own particular sanctum. But, like her nephew, Seraphima Profirovna was inconsistent even in her folly.

Half an hour afterwards when Efime was laying the table for dinner, she entered the dining-room, after repeated and frightful oaths from Akulina and assurances from Minnie that it had been well swept and sprinkled. As she took her seat her eyes fell upon a box of cigarettes sent to her by her niece from the government town.

"Those cigarettes!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands. "I can never smoke them!" She breathed a sigh of regret, for she loved smoking, and the doomed cigarettes were her favourite brand. "They come from the same town," she mused. Then, in a tone of martyr-like decision: "Akulina, take the box away and burn it. Give me your oath—your solemn oath—that you will burn every cigarette in it, and not smoke one yourself, or give one to your rascal of a son or that worthless Efime. Swear!"

Akulina poured forth a picturesque torrent of oaths, and then stretched out her hand for the box.

"You fool!" screamed Seraphima Profirovna, sharply. "You triple fool! Go and get a duster, take up the box with it and burn them together. And wash your filthy hands well before you dare to come near me."

When Akulina returned with the fated duster, her mistress required more oaths, which, for all their startling vividness, did not satisfy her.

"My dove, go with Akulina, and see with your

own eyes—your own, own eyes—that she burns those cigarettes in the stove downstairs.”

Minnie departed, not overpleased with her mission, and witnessed the *suttee*. Akulina's grumbled regrets had almost the picturesqueness of Eastern funeral lamentations.

CHAPTER VII

“KALDOON”

THE ogre descended from his tower for dinner, and at the close of it sat talking to Minnie over his wine, evidently in a most genial temper, though the meal had opened with a scene.

Earlier in the day he had received a consignment of phonographs, gramophones, and all the latest inventions of the kind from America, and the hall was littered with packing-cases and straw. The cost must have reached a very high figure, but that seemed a mere detail to Vladimir Vladimirovich. Yet before sitting down he had rated Efime tremendously for daring to remove from the *zakouska* end of the table a tail of salted herring, which he had considered unfit for a nobleman's mouth.

“It was quite hard, Vladimir Vladimirovich,” he said, by way of palliating his crime.

“Don't presume to dictate to me, fellow!” said his master in tones of Jovian thunder. “I am the best judge of the hardness of my herrings, you fool, you! Don't dare to take away any part of the *zakouska* till I tell you. Understand? I

forbid it. It is one of my rules. I am absolute master in my own house. It is your business to serve me, not to think. Just you do as you're told, you rogue, and don't presume! I've a good mind to fine you a rouble.”

One of the reasons of his servants' cordial hatred for Vladimir Vladimirovich was his method of levying fines for any deviations from his capricious rules. Another enormity was the deposit of ten roubles which he exacted from every one entering his service; this they forfeited if they left before a stipulated time. As his yoke was by no means easy, those who wished to escape from it sought by every means in their power to make the dismissal come from him; while he, seeing their aim, scolded, swore at, and abused them to his heart's content, generally managing to stop short of the words which he knew would delight them. Those who left in defiance of his will had great difficulty in obtaining their passports, which he kept with their deposit. A sturdy *chef*, who had been dismissed with blows and curses, complained officially to the Justice of the Peace; but as that magistrate was one of the few neighbouring gentlemen who had not quarrelled with the ogre, the man did not gain much by his appeal to Cæsar.

The peasants feared and hated the man whom they, in common with his own servants, firmly believed to be a wizard. Not a man or woman in

the village would have crossed the bridge leading to the "Yellow Castle" after dark for untold gold. The light shining from the tower far into the small hours proved to them beyond a doubt that he was practising the black art and making league with the devil. Those who had heard unearthly sounds issuing from the tower believed it to be haunted by tortured spirits, and the more enlightened few, who tried to explain the mechanism of the phonograph, were laughed to scorn and treated as dangerous heretics by the Russian peasants, whose dogged obstinacy is harder to combat than even the prejudices of the British lower middle class.

"It is an instrument—nothing but an instrument," declared the workman who did odd jobs for Vladimir Vladimirovich in his tower. "And *barin* does nothing all night but make it speak and sing. I've seen it with my eyes—my own eyes. It's only an instrument."

"An instrument speaking and singing! Have you no conscience that you lie so, Makàr Chubbann?" demanded an elderly peasant, sticking his hands into the belt of his tunic.

"It does speak, and sing, too," muttered Makàr.

"And what does it say? Speak truth in the fear of God, Makàr."

Makàr scratched his head. "Well—I can't quite tell you. It's some queer, screechy language. Worse than what that French *mamzel*

speaks. Awful screechy. *Barin* says some one spoke into it once, and the words were caught, and come out when he wants them to.”

“Now, don’t you believe anything of the sort! There’s nothing human about those sounds. Human speech can’t be caught. It’s against nature and religion! Oh, thou whose mother’s milk is not yet dry upon thy lips! *Barin* mocks, and thou believest! Cross thyself on entering the tower, and keep as far as thou canst from those works of the devil.”

And the elderly peasant turned away amid a murmur of approval from the listeners.

“Maybe he’s right. It’s awful screechy,” said Makàr, doubtfully, thus passing judgment on *The Swanee River*, as rendered by the latest departure in gramophones.

But it was not only his reputation as a wizard that caused Vladimir Vladimirovich to be hated by the peasants. Most of them were his tenants, and found him a hard and arrogant landlord. One of his favourite English sayings was that one must be just before being generous, but his tenants found in his dealings with them nothing of the latter quality and very little of the former. They held their land for payment and service, and he demanded that which they considered he had no right to demand; making them do the work of the house when there was a stampede of insulted servants, calling them from their fields to help in

the finishing of his castle, which he attempted and abandoned capriciously. When they brought him the rent, they met him face to face in his hall—he would never have allowed their unhallowed feet to press the carpet in his library; laid the gold—he refused to accept “paper” money—on the table before him, casting lowering looks of hate upon him from beneath their heavy brows. The steward verified the sum, and cast the coins into a pail of hot water and soda, which stood ready, stirred them round vigorously, wiped them on a clean towel, and handed them to his master. Only then would this *grand seigneur*, costumed in dingy holland, condescend to touch the money.

Max, who had laughingly called Vladimir Vladimirovich the “ogre,” knew that his name among the peasants was “*Kaldoon*” (the wizard), often accompanied by the adjective “*proklatie*,” which in modest English is generally represented by a simple *d*—.

Minnie, much to Seraphima Profirovna’s bewilderment, had found favour in the eyes of the hated “*Kaldoon*.” He came down to dinner more frequently, sometimes even put in an appearance at lunch, and his plate was now but rarely surrounded by a ring of dishes with morsels of meat, vegetables, or cheese-cakes grease-glued to the centre of them. He was less rough with the servants, and after any explosion of rage would turn to Minnie, if she were present, with an

almost apologetic: “I must be master in my own house, you know, and these rascals need a firm hand, or they presume.”

If Seraphima Profirovna was bewildered at these signs of Minnie’s influence over Vladimir Vladimirovich, the girl herself was scarcely pleased. She liked the ogre, and the knowledge of her own power over this great, middle-aged, tempestuous, undisciplined boy was naturally flattering, but the thought that he was her employer hampered her in the free use of her influence. She was too proud to run the risk of being reminded of her dependent position, consequently made no effort to deepen the impression she had made, and by this very lack of striving did that which she forbore attempting.

Of course Seraphima Profirovna was absolutely incapable of understanding any sympathy between man and woman which had not its roots in the man’s animal nature. “Mària had better make haste home,” she thought. “Vladimir and she are never on good terms, and this little sly thing will be able to turn him round her finger soon. The thin little slip of a creature! Heaven alone knows what he can see in her!”

Had she been capable of writing she might have sent a note of warning to her niece; as it was, she was obliged to content herself with talking matters over with Akulina. She was always at daggers drawn with her nephew’s wife, but, for the

sake of her grand-nieces, would have been sorry to witness a separation between the ill-assorted pair.

"It would be almost impossible to marry the girls," she said to Akulina. "Of course they would go with Maria Alexandrovna, and she has scarcely a *kopeck* of her own. Vladimir made her a wedding present of Mala Roosava, but it is quite a small estate, not worth more than three thousand a year. Of course that is too little to live upon and find dowries for the two girls. My nephew married for pure love, when he might have had any princess or baroness he chose. He saw her at an Institute ball and at church, and married her by the special permission of the archbishop, for she was n't sixteen years old. She was n't so very pretty, after all. A little round thing with red cheeks and black curls—natural curls; they are not allowed to frizz at the Institute. Now see how she repays him. She's always running away and leaving him alone; has hysterics if she stays here six months at a time. He is a man, and not an old man. It serves her right if that English girl turns his head. She's not pretty, either. I can't understand men! How can they look at such a little match? Do you know where they are now? Up in the tower together."

It was quite true. During dinner the conversation had turned upon music, and the ogre, finding that Minnie played, produced the key of the tower and took her up to the room where his

daughters practised on an old, cracked grand piano lost in a corner of the lofty, bare apartment. A gallery ran along the length of it beneath the gilded and painted ceiling; a greenhouse, with a few tall palms and other plants, all neglected, opened out of it on one side, and the lofty windows opposite gave upon a broad, battlemented terrace heaped with glittering, frozen snow. Half a dozen doors led to other rooms in various stages of incompleteness and emptiness.

The ogre's little candle did not shed its beams very far, shining but dimly in the shadowy emptiness of the enormous room. His footsteps and the patter of Minnie's high heels awoke hollow echoes. The moonlight fell in broad, white rays upon the whiter snow of the terrace, through the great windows and across the floor of partly polished *parquet* and partly rough boards. The dim outline of the palms in the greenhouse waved ghost-like across the glass in the mingled moonshine and flickering candle-beams.

Vladimir Vladimirovich put the light down on the piano, produced another key, and unlocked the instrument. Minnie sat down to it. Prompted by the ghostly glimmer of the snow through the windows, she began to play the *Moonlight Sonata*; but her fingers, unused to the cracked and stiffened keys, could not draw from them the soft and dreamy melody she loved. She rose abruptly. “I can't play on that piano,” she said with a

touch of irritation. "It's dreadfully out of order."

"So it is," admitted Vladimir Vladimirovich. "You'll get used to it in time. The opening movement of that sonata is too soft for it altogether. You must bang it about to get some tune out of it. Like this.'

He sat down himself, and broke into the final movement of the same sonata. He played it in much quicker time than is correct, a panting, wailing *prestissimo*, striking the cracked notes with imperious fingers and dragging from them a strange, wizard-like whirl of sound.

The passionate melody, quickened, discordant, wrenched from the stubborn keys, swelled and panted through the echoing room. Minnie stood fascinated and motionless in a broad band of moonlight. She seemed to be listening to the throbbing, tumultuous protest of an unconquered, tormented soul.

Vladimir Vladimirovich's head was bent low, his beard brushed his knees; without a pause he passed from Beethoven to Mozart, from Mozart to Wagner, from Wagner to Rubinstein, breaking off with a crash in an aria from *The Demon*.

He wheeled round on the creaking stool.

"I used to love playing," he said. "Now I only care for my phonographs. I like to set them all squealing together sometimes. Miss Carey, you look like an elf standing there in the moonlight.

Come into my room and hear my gramophones and phonographs.”

He led the way back to the landing and unlocked a door to the right. Minnie followed the ogre into his den.

The room was arranged as a library, or study, with easy-chairs, a desk, bookcases, and a harmonium. In one corner a flight of steps led to a trap-door, whence one could climb by more steps to the very summit of the tower, which commanded a view of the steppe for miles. In the middle of the room was an arch, and beyond it a table piled with instruments and music-sheets.

The ogre offered Minnie a chair, in the green velvet depths of which her soft form was swallowed up as by widely embracing arms. The fluffy, fair head against the dark softness, the gleam of small white hands, the tip of a tiny slipper peeping from the folds of the black dress, the turn of the soft chin, the hint of the softer neck, the mingled pride and sweetness, seriousness and gaiety in the rose-tinted face,—the ogre noticed and appreciated all these things, and his gaze—wholly regretful, half-angry and half-self-contemptuous—would have puzzled Seraphima Profirovna. To a more discerning woman it would merely have expressed his thoughts: “If I were fifteen years younger,—if I were free—if my life were mine to give and to enjoy—if—if—if! If I had met such a woman in my youth

would she have touched me? Probably not. We men might point the moral of a fable the very reverse of that of the fox and the grapes. Only those within our reach are sour, while the unattainable alone are luscious and desirable."

Attracted by his silent gaze, Minnie turned. There was nothing in the look she met that could offend her. Her blue eyes answered it calmly.

"Will you let me hear your phonographs?" she said.

"Presently. Why are you in such a hurry? Do you object to my smoking?"

He lit a fragrant cigar, sent to him direct from Alexandria, and leaned back in his chair.

"I wonder if you know how lucky you are," he said.

"I?" questioned Minnie, in surprise.

"Who else? You are so young——"

"And so poor," interrupted Minnie, with a laugh.

"Poor!" echoed the ogre, scornfully. "That is nothing. Wealth is but a word. Look here, Miss Carey; I've fifteen thousand pounds a year, and half a dozen estates in central and southern Russia. I would give you all if you could give me your youth in exchange."

"You are not old," said Minnie, with a touch of impatience. "We English have different ideas——"

"And different temperaments," put in the ogre.

“Oh, yes, I have heard that men of the Anglo-Saxon race keep the freshness, the vigour, and the pugnacity of youth to an age we Russians count as old. But I am a Russian, and when I call myself old, I mean it.”

“I shall not always be young, but you will keep your wealth till you die. The exchange you spoke of would be a bad bargain for you if it were possible.”

“You talk like a Jew,” said the ogre, petulantly. “I tell you, riches give a man nothing.”

“You say that because you never felt poverty, and——” She stopped.

“And what?” demanded Vladimir Vladimirovich, imperiously.

“And have never understood what to do with your wealth,” she finished calmly, with a look which meant—“You *would* have it.”

The ogre set his teeth in his cigar, glared, softened, and said quietly: “You are right. Do you know what eats at the heart of the Russian nation? That eternal ‘*Ne stoyit*’—‘It is not worth while.’ We are too introspective or too indifferent. Those of us who think, pass our time wondering why life is what it is, and do nothing to make it better. *Ne stoyit!* All the same, we are born to die. It all ends so quickly.”

“For us individually, but——”

“Oh, spare me talk of ‘the coming race’! I know all that. It’s an old song. You are

active and full of life, but in reality you don't care for 'the coming race' any more than I do. You have not a touch of the Asiatic indifference which holds Russia back. Life and vigour is in your every glance. You are 'a sanguine.' Nothing more. You look soft and delicate, but that's nothing. So do wire and cats. But wire is hard to break, and cats have nine lives."

Minnielaughed. The fresh sound rippled through the room, awakening echoes which seemed to laugh on their own account at the rarity of the sounds they flung back.

The ogre rose from his seat and paced the room.

"Twenty-five years ago, when I was even younger than you are now, I was active too, in my way. Hunted, rode, boated, played the violin and piano for hours together—and dreamed—incoherent dreams of the Lord knows what. Then my father sent me to the Lyceum. I was country born and bred. I hated the town, I hated the college discipline—strict as to outward show, lax as to the inner life. Soon I hated my comrades. At first I was merely indifferent to them. I was seventeen; too old to be moulded by their example. The college was a miniature world, with its vice, rivalries, hypocrisies, trickeries, and show. I finished the Course for my father's sake, but nothing would induce me to enter the diplomatic or military service. How did I get the title of 'Excellency'? Trickery! My wife left me no peace,

and I was a fool, as many a man has been before me, from Samson—nay, from Adam, downwards. I went to Petersburg, ‘used my influence,’ was presented to the Empress, and nominated Inspector of some Orphanage Asylum. I have hardly set foot in the place—simply send a cheque every great holiday, and so earn a title. Trickery, toadyism, comedy! I am a *dvorianine* born. It is enough for me. But, to win the regard of fools, I must kiss an Empress’s hand for a title. But after finishing at the Lyceum, I would not serve. That bite at the world had given me a bad taste in the mouth.”

He paused and smoked furiously in silence for several minutes. Minnie did not speak. She knew he was speaking more to himself than to her, pouring out pent-up thoughts in a rush of freedom.

“I had another plan of life,” he went on presently. “I had seen a girl, a young thing six years younger than myself. I thought as she was fresh as a flower to look at, she must be as unspoiled. She had been kept from the world. We Lyceists were sent out into it. We were counted as acquisitions at soirées and dances, exhibitions and reviews, and all the monkey-shows. I’ve heard something about the ‘paid guest,’ a being of decent appearance, hired for the evening to eke out the ever-lessening number of dancing men. I felt like that—without the guinea. The uniform of a Lyceist in the higher classes makes a good

show. In his cocked hat, with his rapier at his side, and his cuffs and collar heavy with gold braid, he might be taken by the uninitiated for a youthful consul in full dress. Yes, we saw enough of the masquerade. But this girl was different, I thought. The few balls she had been to could not be counted as 'Society.' Two or three times during the season, at the Cadets' or the Corps des Pages, she took a couple of turns round the room, scarcely lifting her eyes or speaking to her partner, watched by her sharp-eyed *dame de classe*. I met her so, and I saw her from afar at church. I had scarcely spoken a dozen words to her, but she became the centre of my plans for the future. I would marry her, I thought, and we would live together in the country far away from the glitter and noise of the stupid masquerade they call 'Society.' She married me. She was penniless. The daughter of a ruined *dvorianine*, entitled by birth to free education at the Institute, but looking forward to nothing better than the life of a governess. Of course she married me, and ruined all my hopes. We never had an idea in common. She is ignorant, obstinate, and the most narrow-minded woman I have ever met. A middle-aged *Instituteka*; as undeveloped—mentally—as when I took her from her school,—she has lost the freshness of youth without gaining the flavour of middle-age. She hates the country. She longs for the world like

a moth for the light. She hates me, I believe,” said the ogre, grimly, “and would leave me if she had courage and money. She stays and hates me.”

He went on, speaking hotly and resentfully. The little black figure in the chair never moved. The blue eyes watched his movements with calm pity. At last he recovered himself. “Why do I talk so to you?” he asked, coming to a standstill in front of her, and speaking with the irritation often felt by men whose nerves betray them into indiscreet confidences—“You are a child.”

“You are not the first to speak to me so,” Minnie assured him. “Most of the young men I know tell me their troubles and difficulties, love-stories, ambitions, and disappointments. I don’t know why. I suppose I simply invite confidence. There are such types—destined to hear every one else’s story, and have none of their own.”

“Or, having it, to keep it to themselves,” said the ogre, grimly. Then abruptly, almost rudely, he added: “Don’t they end by making love to you?”

“A few of them,” she admitted calmly.

“I brought you here to let you hear my gramaphones, and have done nothing but talk rot to you. Now listen to this.”

He passed the arch, fumbled for a few minutes at the table, and then *The Golden Calf* bellowed through the room.

The phonograph, with all its various me-

chanisms and improvements, is without doubt a wonderful invention, but as yet imperfect, and somewhat trying, at close quarters, to sensitive ears. Minnie listened to several songs and conversations in various languages, most of which she could not understand, though she was a very fair linguist, and then accepted the ogre's invitation to inspect the instrument.

Vladimir Vladimirovich was in his element. His face flushed with interest, and he was as excited as a boy as he explained the system to her. At first she was really interested, but as time went on she grew weary. Conversations, negro melodies, operatic airs, quarrels, jokes, dialogues, recitations—all but half-intelligible—wearied her, and she retreated to her chair beyond the arch. Vladimir Vladimirovich almost forgot her presence. He had mounted his hobby-horse. He went from one instrument to another, starting and checking them, changing their themes, making them laugh and cry, shriek and sing, till at last, giving vent himself to a strange, discordant chuckle, he set three going together, letting loose a mechanical Babel. It was too much. With her hands to her ears, Minnie fled. The discordant riot of released sound pursued her down the great, unfinished staircase—for she had left the door ajar in her precipitate flight—and followed her even into the dining-room, where Seraphima Profirovna woke from her nap to say, making the sign of the

cross,—“Holy, heavenly mother! What is that noise?”

“Three phonographs squealing at once,” said Minnie, sinking into a chair. “It’s awful!”

Seraphima Profirovna rubbed her eyes, grasped reality, and said resignedly: “Oh, Vladimir and his machines.”

The shrill sounds rioted, clashed, and, at last, died away.

An hour later, passing through the hall on her way to bed, Minnie heard Vladimir Vladimirovich playing Mozart’s *Requiem* on the harmonium. She paused to listen. He was evidently in his right mind. His irritation had worked itself off in the discordant carnival of sound he had set loose. But even as she listened to the haunting lament of the *Lachrymosa*, with the aspiring hope so softly shrill that ripples through its sadness, it broke into discordance, a mad scramble of staccato runs, an excruciating chord or two; then the tower door was slammed and locked.

Minnie ran swiftly through the glittering, ghostly park. The stinging air seemed alive with strange sounds.

CHAPTER VIII

"IN DARKEST RUSSIA"

"**H**AVE you sworn never to leave Seraphima Profirovna? Has the ogre imprisoned you in his tower? Seriously, where have you hidden yourself this week?"

Max, walking by Minnie's side through the village, his horse's reins flung over his arm, and the animal walking condescendingly on the other side of him, asked these questions with an intent more serious than might appear.

"I did n't hide. What awful rot!" said Minnie, sweetly and politely. "I was passionately occupied in moving, wrote letters, explored the whole blessed park, and to-day, as thou seest, I venture to carry myself in the village. I was twice inside the river from which time since I saw you and your sister."

"When?"

"Monday and Thursday."

"Monday we lunched at the Ostrougoffs'. Thursday——"

"I don't care where thou wert. We did not meet. What's the odds? It is not such a very great cause for regret, Maximillian Ardilionovich."

Her Russian was so very much funnier than it is possible to give in translation that Max's eyes were dancing.

“ It is a good thing I met you,” he said. “ That is, if you happen to be afraid of dogs. There are legions in the village, and they howl tremendously at sight of a stranger, and bite sometimes.”

As if to prove his words, a couple of gaunt, wicked-looking animals flung themselves over a gate, and set up a wild chorus of barks, in which all the dogs of the village joined, rushing out of the huts, leaping down from ricks, and springing from behind mounds of snow.

Max cracked his whip. “ Down—you beasts!” he cried; and, catching sight of a peasant in the nearest yard, shouted: “ Call off your dogs, Stepan Krechenko!”

“ They're not all mine, *panitch*,” Stepan reminded him. Then to his property: “ Shut up and come here, thou cur!”

Minnie walked serenely on amidst the yelping dogs, which slunk away at length, cowed by Max's whip, and perhaps tired of fruitless barking.

“ And you expect to find the post-office!” said Max, glancing at the letters she had thrust between the revers of her jacket.

“ You'll show me where it is, of course. And if I had not met you, I should have asked this boy.”

She referred to a tiny man in very big *valinkie*

(high snow-boots), sheepskin, and cap, which it was plain had not been made for the mite who slipped about somewhere inside them.

The child, his little legs placed sturdily apart, his hands thrust into his belt, was staring at the advancing pair with his flax-blue eyes.

"Vanka," he shouted, without removing his gaze, "*Vanka, ghospoda edwit.*"

At this cry of "the gentry are coming!" another boy ran out of the hut, and soon Minnie and Max and the horse were surrounded by a crowd of children, whose solemnly staring eyes disconcerted the girl much more than the barking of the dogs had done.

"Don't gape so," said Max, good-naturedly. "Have you never seen a *barishna* before?"

Thus admonished, the admiring crowd dropped in the rear; but the young people approached the one shop in the village, where stamps and *valinkie*, harness and bread, soap and *kvass* were to be had for payment, followed by an ever-growing retinue.

"Where 's the letter-box?" Minnie asked Max, who had remained standing on the step, holding his horse's reins while she made her purchase.

"At the station. Twenty *versts* away. Did you really expect to find a post-office here, oh sweet simplicity? Have you forgotten that you are in the heart of the steppe?"

"What shall I do with my letters?" asked Minnie, in comical dismay.

“Give them to me. But, as a rule, you must give them to the coachman, who will post them when he goes to town, which is about twice a week, I believe. My man goes to-morrow.”

He put the letters into his pocket, and they moved on again.

“Where are you going now?” asked Max.

“Back to the ‘Yellow Castle.’ The village is not much to look at.”

It certainly was not. A collection of thatched, white-washed, miniature-windowed huts, built on the road, or in untidy yards, placed carelessly in the midst of the wind-swept, freezingly white steppe, with neither tree, shelter, nor hollow. Behind rose the tower of the “Yellow Castle” against the dark outline of the park. Several enormous black pigs grunted and poked about in the frozen snow, greedily devouring what garbage they found. A rough wooden sledge, driven by a muffled peasant, drove past with a jingling of bells; two or three men, sheep-skinned to the ears and capped to the eyes, leant over their gates or pottered about their yards. There is not much else for them to do in the winter. The ice and the snow take undisputed possession of the fields, nursing the future harvest beneath a heavy, spotless mantle.

“You might as well see the church now you have come so far,” said Max. “Are you obliged to get back for lunch?”

"Not at all. I don't hardly never lunch. I drink coffee late. I'm awful lazy these dark mornings. When I come back from a walk I just go into the pantry and drink a glass of milk and eat a bit of black bread. I believe Efime is glad to see me. He smiles."

"Of course he's a new footman. There are always new ones in the 'Yellow Castle.' But what is surprising about his smile?"

"If you saw him thou wouldst understand. Thin, yellow, and melancholy. But where's the church? I don't see it."

"It's farther on. Midway between this and my village. By the road my place is a good six *verst*s from the Gortchnikoff. There's no bridge across the river between our estates. There are boats in the summer and ice in the winter, so it's really not worth while building a bridge. The church serves for both villages. It's a curiosity in its way. It's not very far. This beast bothers me, though. I've been over to Ostrougoff's this morning on a matter of business, and it's a good stretch there and back for the old animal. Besides, I want to walk with you. Pity you can't ride behind me, holding to my belt—if I had one in the old style; or that I can't put you in front of me like a Cossack riding off with a Tartar princess."

He turned and surveyed the children, who were still following, and called to one:

“ Vasha, tell your brother to come to me if he wants to earn a *poltienik*.”

Vasha scampered off as quickly as he could in his thick *valinkie*, and presently returned with a loutish lad, roused from a half-slumber on the stove by the prospect of earning half a rouble, and even willing to ride the horse home.

He scrambled heavily into the saddle, half-falling several times, and clinging with hands and legs like a great clumsy crab. Max and Minnie turned in the direction of the church.

“ We ’ll have a look round, and then take a short cut across the river and go home to tea. What do you think of my programme ? ” asked Max.

Minnie found it very acceptable. The last two days had been slightly dull. She had read her small stock of new books,—English, Russian, and French,—re-read many of the old ones, pored over the ever-fresh pages of her favourite poets, but had wearied for congenial companionship, for she was a very sociable girl. The ogre, since the memorable night he had made hideous with discord, had not emerged from his tower except in the small hours to demolish the ring of cold dishes encircling his plate on the ever-laid dining-room table. Seraphima Profirovna’s endless tales and whimsicalities, startlingly amusing at first, were apt to pall when one grew accustomed to them; even Akulina’s vivid oaths seemed tame by force

of familiarity. Minnie was openly glad at this meeting with Max, and walked lightly by his side over the stained and hardened snow in the road.

The church was a small, white building, with a green dome surmounted by a gilded cross glittering in the cold sunlight. The snow covered the graves and headstones and crosses in the graveyard, save where pious hands had cleared a space to pray or lay offerings over the recently dead, or to bury those who had died still more recently. Except for these detached clearings, it might have seemed as if Heaven had covered the peasant-dead with a royal mantle of spotless ermine.

Inside, the church was small and dark. There were only two pews, for the lords of the manor, one each side of the chancel. The walls were covered with gaudily painted pictures and images, while the *iconostasis* was a blaze of gold and silver, purple and bright blue; beyond, through the half-closed opening, was a glimpse of that altar which no woman must ever approach.

Two of the paintings attracted Minnie's attention. One was of the Virgin with the Holy Child playing the *violin* in the position referred to in the text written in Slavonic round the image—"And the Babe leapt in her womb for joy." The other might have been a representation—not by Doré—of Dante's *Inferno*, painted with grotesque realism. Damned souls writhed in vivid flames,

while the Evil One, horned, hoofed, and tailed, prodded them with savage delight and a pitchfork. Minnie, feeling as if she must somehow have slipped back into the Middle Ages, was roused from her contemplation of this painting by the muffled tread of *valinkie*. A peasant entered, holding his shaggy cap in one hand and his little son by the other. Every day is a saint's day in Russia, and it was most likely the "name's day" of the little peasant,—that of the saint by whose name he was called. He held a candle in his chubby hand. Reaching the chancel, he raised himself on tiptoe, trying to light his candle at one of those burning on the tripod. His father offered to light it for him, but he replied sturdily: "No—no. I will do it myself. Lift me." As the man did so, the child stuck his little taper triumphantly among the others. Then, wriggling down from his father's arms, he ran to the *iconostasis*, and kissed the feet, the lips, the hands, and garments of the pictured saints with a passion of love and fervour that brought a gentle smile to the lips of the girl who was watching him—the heretic girl who wore no cross round her white neck, nor made the sign of it as she prayed, passed, entered, and left a church.

The peasant watched his son stolidly for a time, kissed several images, prostrated himself, and touched the floor with his forehead. When he arose and looked round for his son, the boy was

standing close to Minnie, staring at the hideous painting with wide, childish eyes. The man took hold of his hand.

"Come, Vanoushka," he said. "Kiss the dear little God (Bozhinka) on the tail, and come home."

The boy's rosy lips obediently pressed the devil's tail with childish devotion, then, making a final sign of the cross, he went off hand in hand with his father.

Minnie's sense of humour was very strong, but she did not laugh.

"Poor mite!" she said. "But the father—a grown man. What superstition!"

Max was gnawing his moustache. "What else can you expect from a Russian peasant? Look at the state they are in. Some of us do our best, but it's uphill work. You know, of course, that the government is dead against all organised reform. Individually, a man can do little against such a mass of ignorance and indifference. The other day the district doctor was dining with us after a round in the village. You should have heard him speak. He was beside himself. 'What can I do with them?' he cried a dozen times. 'Maximillian Ardilionovich, we must do something, you know. It's awful!' He is fresh from Petersburg. Came out rather low on the list, or he would have got a better place. Well, one of his patients—an old woman—suffers from boils in the armpits. When he asked her if she had

tried any remedy, she said: ‘Yes, the very best. I rubbed them with a dead man’s spoon.’”

“What?” asked Minnie, perplexedly.

“The spoon a dead man had been accustomed to use. She was quite surprised at the inefficacy of the remedy. They believe in all sorts of charms. Our lads and lasses use love-philtres still. Sometimes with bad results, if the dose happens to be too strong. Of course they believe Vladimir Vladimirovich to be a wizard.”

“Good heavens!” was all Minnie could find to say.

Vèra was unaffectedly glad to see the visitor her brother brought back with him; and, seated once more on the shabby divan, Minnie told of her evening in the ogre’s tower.

“Typical of the ogre,” asserted Max. “He loves music gone mad, or his love of music has gone mad, whichever way you like to put it. But I must confess to a weakness for the ogre, in spite of his bluster. He seems to me to be a genius run wild for want of a proper outlet. It’s really a pity he was never poor—really cruelly poor—like Gorki, for example. I believe the world would have heard of him in that case.”

“What an idea!” laughed Vèra; but Minnie was silently following up the thought and agreeing with it.

When the brother and sister heard of Minnie’s change of quarters, they cried simultaneously:

"What a miracle! Vladimir Vladimirovich has given up a key!" But Max looked grave in a minute, insisting that it was just like a *chudak* to let a girl sleep in the pavilion alone.

"Confess," said Vèra, "that in spite of all your bravery, you feel creepy and lonely sometimes. Now, don't you?"

"But that 's not being afraid!" protested Minnie, thus tacitly owning to creepiness.

"Then you must run across the river to us in the evenings after dinner. I won't say, 'If you are not afraid,' as you seem to have no idea of terror. When Seraphima Profirovna sleeps after dinner—she always does, does n't she?—wrap yourself up well and come. We'll give you a lantern."

When Max went to sleep that night his last thought was of a lonely girl in a crazy house by the river.

They met frequently during the next three weeks, which made a pleasant break in Minnie's life. The river divided yet linked them. They met there in the morning, making the ice ring beneath their flashing skates, and in the evenings—dark and mysteriously silent as the deepest night—Minnie ran across it, her lantern throwing flickering lights and shadows in the moonless dark.

Vèra had the piano moved from the rarely used drawing-room into the cosy, shabby library, and

Minnie did not break off petulantly at the first bars of a sonata.

She did not recross the river alone; it was Max who carried the lantern on the return journey, and the evenings which failed to bring the dainty little lady with her slangy talk seemed strangely dull to him. “She always makes me laugh,” he said to Vèra, by way of accounting for his disappointment.

“My pupils are coming home to-morrow,” said Minnie, one day, as she absently stirred rose-preserve into her cup of golden-coloured tea.

“What a bother!” exclaimed Max, vigorously; which was rather a strange speech for the prospective bridegroom of Lydia Gortchnikova.

PART II

THE ARRIVAL AND DEPARTURE OF THE DUKES

CHAPTER I

PIN-PRICKS

IN the street the snow, freezing as fast as it fell, formed a firm sledge-way. Muffled figures bent over the tram lines, armed with long iron sticks, brooms, and spades. Every workman's moustache or beard was covered with frost, but now and then one of them, rubbing his clumsily gloved hand across his mouth, dashed the white away, and bent again to his work. The *istvoitchicki* flicked the snow from their horses and sledge-rugs with long-haired brushes, or, swinging their arms across their chests, patched either sleeve of their white caftans with the original colour. The noonday sun, shining with cold brilliancy on the snow, dazzled the eyes more than the shimmer of summer, and the blue of the sky seemed bluer than June's azure in contrast with the whiteness it

overarched. All the passers-by walked quickly, stung into activity by the bright and merciless frost, and acquaintances, greeting each other, called through the clouds of their quickly freezing breath: "Pretty cold, eh, Ivan Ivanovich?" Women's eyes and cheeks, peeping from shawls or hoods or furs, were so bright and rosy that Marusia Gortchnikova might well have envied them had she seen them, but she lay sleepily cross and languidly indifferent to everything in a bed warm as a hothouse, her grey-streaked hair flung untidily over the pillow, and her listless, sunken eyes closed.

The door opened and closed breezily, and a tall girl with proud eyes the colour of sapphires, her face flushed with exercise in the open air, walked to the bed and looked down upon the sleeper with pity generously mingled with irritation.

"Why don't you get up, Marusia?" she said, in a clear voice. "You know mamma will be back from her bath presently, and will make another scene. Mademoiselle came to me in tears. Get up, do!"

"*Mademoiselle est bête; et laisse-moi en paix —toi!*" said Marusia, sullenly, lifting her lifeless eyes for a second and dropping them again.

Lydia shrugged her shoulders and turned away from the bed to confront a subdued-looking, dark-eyed young woman who had crept noiselessly into the room.

"Well! Won't she get up, Leda?"

"Looks like it, does n't it?" was Lydia's counter question with a gesture towards the bed.

"Oh, *mon Dieu!*" cried Mademoiselle, wringing her shapely, soft hands. "What will Madame say?"

"You are too timid and too meek. You should remind mamma with firmness and dignity that you are not to be blamed for Marusia's laziness."

"It's easy enough for you to talk—you are not in my position," sighed Mademoiselle, regretfully.

"*Pauvre petite!*" said Lydia, smiling. Mademoiselle was as tall as her pupil, but somehow the adjective "little" suited her.

"It is the same story every day," declared the French girl. "Yet what am I to do? Marie,—Marusia, *mais levez-vous donc! C'est midi passé.*"

She bent over the girl and shook her gently. Marusia did not deign to reply except by a grunt of disapproval. Mademoiselle cast a look of despair at Lydia, who walked resolutely to the bed. "Marusia, get up at once!" she said, sharply, and as the only effect was a repeated grunt, she suddenly flung the silken counterpane over the bed-rail and pulled her sister out of bed. Marusia slipped to the floor and went into hysterics.

"You wretch—you horrid wretch!" she gasped between her shrieks. "I'll tell mamma you and Mademoiselle worry me into hysterics. You know

I'm nervous. Oh—oh—mamma! I want mamma! Go away, you wretches!"

She rolled on the rug and tore at the lace on her nightgown.

"*Mon Dieu!*" sighed Mademoiselle.

Lydia stood looking down at the writhing figure, then shot a meaning glance at the water-jug, but before she had time to put her thought into action the door opened and her mother rustled in.

"*Bozhia moy!*" exclaimed Madame Gortchnikova. "What is all this?"

She stood for a moment in tragic stillness, then rushed to Marusia, and fell on her knees beside her. "What is it, my angel? Who has offended you? Hush—hush—my pet!"

"It's Mademoiselle's fault, — Mademoiselle's and Lydia's. They worried me — they —" the rest was expressed in shrieks.

Madame Gortchnikova rose to her feet with a rustle, and turned like a fury—silken-clad—on Mademoiselle.

"How dare you—you—you creature? How dare you annoy my daughter? How dare you drive her into hysterics, you heartless, worthless wretch?"

She spoke Russian and used much stronger words, which poor, timid Mademoiselle did not understand. She only knew that Madame was abusing her to-day for insisting on Marusia's

getting up, as yesterday she had abused her for not insisting.

“*Mais, Madame—*” she stammered, and her soft eyes grew softer with unshed tears. “You told me on no account to let Marie——”

“Who? Marie, indeed! Who gave you the right to call my daughter by her name? Know your place, you presumptuous Frenchwoman!”

The meekest have their point of pride. Mademoiselle’s was touched.

“I have never been accustomed to say ‘mademoiselle’ to my pupils. I am not a nursemaid,” she said, with surprising courage, and the dark eyes grew proud.

“Be quiet! Don’t let me hear your abominable voice,” commanded Madame Gortchnikova, but she dropped the subject and turned to Marusia. “My golden one, my little sun, my soul, hush,—you will make yourself ill! You senseless Frenchwoman, why don’t you fetch a glass of water?”

Mademoiselle, glad to escape, went out of the room, though there was water on the washstand. Lydia would have followed, but her mother stopped her.

“Why don’t you try to soothe your poor sister? Have you no heart?” asked Madame Gortchnikova, tragically.

From time to time Lydia’s patience gave way, and she spoke her mind freely, generally with

disastrous results; but the endurance of a high-spirited girl of twenty is short-lived.

"How can you be so unjust to Mademoiselle, mamma?" she burst out. "You know it is not her fault. You rated her yesterday because she let Marusia stay in bed till lunch, and to-day you tell her not to presume to worry her. What is one to do? You know that it is quite impossible to make Marusia reasonable."

"Hold your tongue!" screamed her mother. "You have no heart. You are my torment. God gave you to me as a punishment."

The Russian language is rich in picturesque revilings, and Lydia came in for a generous share, while her face grew coldly immobile, and her eyes said plainly—"Much good I've done by speaking!"

"How dare you look at me like that?" demanded her mother, having exhausted her supply of unflattering adjectives. "You are simply a brute. You—you—" Shrieking and sobbing, she fell beside her daughter. Lydia left the room. On the threshold she met Mademoiselle with a glass of water.

"Don't go in," advised Lydia. "You'll only make them worse. I'm going down-stairs to see if I can get one of the doctors or nurses to come to them."

"I'll come with you. Madame will be angry if she knows you went down-stairs alone."

Lydia made a gesture of impatience, then smiled, and said: "Come if you like."

As they descended the marble stairs of the Hydropathic Establishment they met one of the doctors—a curly headed young man—coming up. He stood aside with a bow to let them pass, but Lydia stopped, returned his bow stiffly, and said, more stiffly still: "Will you be so good as to go to my mother in my sister's room, Nicolas Gregorovich?"

The young doctor passed his hand through his hair with operatic despair. "Mària Alexandrovna is ill?" he asked in a voice that corresponded with the gesture.

"She is in hysterics," said Lydia, coldly.

"I fly!" exclaimed the doctor, and ran up the stairs three at a time.

Lydia turned to Mademoiselle with a faint smile. "We have a breathing space," she said. "Come into my room. If Fräulein is there, I'll turn her out."

The two governesses slept by turns in Lydia's and Marusia's rooms. Madame Gortchnikova had arranged their service with the pretentious solemnity of a court ceremonial. For twenty-four hours Mademoiselle was attached to Lydia and Fräulein to Marusia; the following day the rôles were reversed. One of the causes of dispute between Lydia and her mother lay in the strictness of this arrangement, which did not leave the girl one

moment's privacy. If either of the governesses was seen without her charge, there was inevitably a scene, ending inevitably in hysterics.

"I want to be alone sometimes," Lydia would remonstrate. "I am nearly twenty-one years of age. Not a baby, thank Heaven! Why must I be continually watched as if I were a criminal?"

"Am I to pay governesses for doing nothing?" Madame Gortchnikova would inquire. Despite her pride in her gentle birth the lady's ideas were quite commercially practical as regards the amount of attention to be got out of a governess for thirty roubles a month.

The governesses at the "Yellow Castle" were changed as often as the servants. Those who were able to do so broke the terms of their engagement and went away, glad to escape from the "Yellow Castle" no richer than they entered it. Others were sent away because Marusia or Lydia disliked them and refused their companionship. When it was Lydia who obstinately refused to accept the companion thrust upon her, Madame Gortchnikova's anger was directed against the girl herself, but when Marusia tearfully declared that Mademoiselle or Fräulein or Miss made her nervous and that she could not bear her, it was the governess who bore the brunt of the succeeding storm.

Lydia liked Claire Rousselle, and the days when she was on duty with Lydia were blessed breathing

spaces to the French girl. Lydia would read to herself, write her diary, play, or paint as she chose, and Madame Gortchnikova, coming into the room, as she always did several times during the day to see what her daughter and her companion were doing, always found Mademoiselle at her post, sewing, embroidering, and sometimes reading.

"You have no right to sew for yourself or read for your own pleasure when you are on duty," she would say in a voice that rose and quavered ominously.

"Mademoiselle can't read aloud for hours together," Lydia would remark. The false impression conveyed in the words was soothing to Madame Gortchnikova's always excitable nerves, and she would go away, merely determining to give Mademoiselle her stockings to darn.

"Have you had your grammar and dictation lesson?" was another invariable question.

After bitter experience of the scenes that resulted from truth-telling, Lydia would reply with a calm affirmative lie.

"What am I to do?" she would say, when Mademoiselle remonstrated. "I'm perfectly sick of scenes."

"Why not have your grammar lesson?" Mademoiselle would suggest. She was very conscientious.

"You know quite well you are talking nonsense. I am not a child, and have finished with

grammar long ago. I have nothing against writing an essay two or three times a week, but I'm not going to live like a machine all my life. Of course, I understand that Marusia must be given employment every minute, or she will do nothing but lie in bed or polish her nails all day long. But I'm not 'nervous,' thank Heaven! and can fill up my time very well by myself."

Mademoiselle looked at the proud young face, and said with a sigh: "Do you know, you sometimes seem very hard, Leda?"

"Really? Well, perhaps I am. But if Marusia were ill, I should be sorry for her."

"And what does Nicolas Gregorovich say? Complete nervous prostration—deep-rooted melancholia——"

"Nicolas Gregorovich! He says what mamma wants him to say."

"Why don't you like him?"

"Because he shames his noble profession. He is a toady. The great physician, Professor Ivanoff, told Marusia quite plainly that there was nothing the matter with her but laziness and bad temper. He would n't even write a prescription. He said: 'Early rising, cold water, fresh air, and activity. That 's the only prescription which will do you any good.' Now that was something like a doctor! Nicolas Gregorovich only makes mamma and Marusia worse."

"But your mother says he is 'so talented!'"

“Mamma is as easily gulled as a child, and taken in by the grossest flattery. She called Professor Ivanoff a bear, and thinks Nicolas Gregorovich has talent because he uses high-sounding scientific words.”

Fräulein, who was “on duty” with Lydia, was in the room when the two girls entered, ostensibly tidying Lydia’s drawers. The Russo-German, being ignorant, thick-headed, and thick-skinned, would most likely stay on at the “Yellow Castle.” Madame Gortchnikova was delighted with her, and would not listen to Lydia, who declared that the German was as stupid as an owl, almost illiterate, and fit only to be a nursery governess for children under five. She was a fair-haired, common-looking young woman, who ate with her knife and occasionally used her *serviette* as a handkerchief; but Madame Gortchnikova—wearied by the German’s predecessor, an “insolent,” educated woman—was glad to feel herself mistress with Fräulein.

“You need not touch my drawers, Fräulein,” Lydia said, coldly. “I keep them in order myself; and please go into the dining-room. I am going to talk French with Mademoiselle.”

“But, Lydia Vladimirovna, it is your day with me. It is my duty to be with you.”

“I have spoken quite enough with you for one day. We walked for more than an hour. Please go.”

"It is your day with me, Lydia Vladimirovna," persisted the German, stolidly. "Her Excellency will be angry if I leave you."

It was one of Fräulein's habits—irritating to Lydia, soothing to Madame Gortchnikova—to use her employer's title.

"Leave Her Excellency to me," remarked Lydia, shortly.

"I cannot leave you with Mademoiselle. It is my never-to-be-forgotten duty to be with you."

Lydia's eyes grew bluer, as they always did when she was angry.

"Really? Well, if you won't leave the room, I will."

She stalked into the dining-room, followed by her two retainers.

Fräulein did not understand French, and prowled around the room, fuming and fretting while Lydia talked to Claire Rousselle.

"What a nuisance this German is!" she said. "I wanted to sit quietly in my room and read Dostoiewsky. Peter Petrovich brought me *Crime and Punishment* the other day."

"I remember. I was trembling all the time for fear Madame would return."

"Do you think there would have been a scene? Mamma can be astute when she likes to control herself. She would have thanked Peter Petrovich quite sweetly and taken the book away from me when he was gone."

“Lydia Vladimirovna,” put in Fräulein, “you are not to speak French to-day.”

Lydia went on talking to Mademoiselle.

“Lydia Vladimirovna,” repeated Fraulein, in a rage, “I will complain to Her Excellency; and as for you, Mademoiselle——”

“Leave Mademoiselle alone!” said Lydia, sharply. “Complain to mamma if you like, but if you do, I will refuse to be with you or speak a word of German. I am very obstinate, you know, Fräulein, and mamma will be obliged to send you away. She won’t keep you only for Marusia. Why, you would be free every other day!”

She turned again to Mademoiselle. “Oh—if I were only twenty-one!” she cried with a suppressed rage of desire. “I am not nervous, but if this life goes on much longer I am afraid I shall be. Sometimes I want to scream and run away from it all—anywhere, anywhere so as to be free of all these petty troubles. How I envy those people whose lives are tragedies!”

“I don’t think there are many,” said Mademoiselle, quietly. “Most people’s lives are neither happy nor miserable.”

“And yours?”

“I am very tired. Nothing more.”

“If I were you——” began Lydia, and stopped abruptly.

“Well?” asked Claire.

“I don’t quite know what I should do, but I am

quite sure that I would not stay and be pin-pricked as you are."

Mademoiselle's drooped lids trembled slightly. "Perhaps I shall not always stay," she said, in a low voice. "But why should I simply change one employer for another? They are all pretty much alike. I heard enough to assure me of that when I was staying at the Home between my last place and this. And my experiences have proved it, too. Sometimes the pupil is impossible, sometimes Madame, and sometimes—Monsieur. It comes to the same thing in the end."

"Then change your profession," suggested Lydia with the coolness of the inexperienced.

"That's so easy, is n't it?" retorted Mademoiselle, with a touch of impatience.

"But what did you mean when you said you would not always stay?"

Mademoiselle coloured slightly. "A woman can always hope to—marry," she said, slowly. "Governesses don't often have the chance,—they are poor and have no family behind them. But you, for example, I can't understand why you did n't marry M. Wonsovich. He was rather old, it is true, but he would have taken you out of your present life, at all events."

This was a very skilful fence.

"You are as easily gulled as mamma," said Lydia. "He certainly asked me to marry him, or rather he asked mamma if he might marry me,

and mamma said yes. It was I who refused him, but if he had had one interview with papa, it would have been M. Wonsovich who would have refused me. Don't you see he only wanted me as his wife for the big dowry he thinks I will have? Why, even Marusia—and you cannot say she is attractive—has had her suitors.”

“Why should you think it is only your money? You are not the only rich girl in the world,” Mademoiselle reminded her.

“I am not a beauty—or strikingly interesting and original to be loved at first sight,” said Lydia, slowly. “And how can a man learn to love me by degrees when he can never get to know me? Meeting continually in Society does n't really count. The men always talk to the married ladies and leave the girls to their chaperones.”

“But you have known Maximillian Ardilionovich nearly all your life.”

“Max? Oh, he hardly counts,” said Lydia, but her face softened. Max was the only man for whom she had a real liking, and in her moments of discouragement the thought of him as a possible husband was not unpleasant. But there were other and longer moments when she longed for a life of broader horizon than Max could give her. She wanted to hold her life in her own hands, to do with it what she would. Marriage—at least immediate marriage—did not attract her, except in dark moments when it appeared as her

only escape from being wounded to weakness by innumerable pin-pricks.

"And Peter Petrovich?" asked Claire.

"You are as bad as grandmamma" [in Russia grand-aunts are grandmothers] "in counting every man who makes our acquaintance as my suitor. Peter Petrovich is not in the least in love with me, and I——"

"Well?"

"Sometimes I like him, and sometimes I dislike him. I believe he laughs at me. I hate to be found amusing. I know—Vèra has told me—that I am dreadfully out-of-date and ignorant and countrified. But it is n't my fault if I've never read Gorki except on the sly, and don't even know extracts from anything about the Russian classics except Pouchkine, and Goncharoff, and that type. Peter Petrovich should not make me responsible for my education."

A round and rubicund page appeared at the door, and asked if he was to serve lunch, as it was half an hour late.

"Wait a little longer," said Fräulein. "Her Excellency is not ready yet."

The boy vanished, but a moment later his cherubic face again appeared through the portière, and he sung out: "*Gospodin* Korsakoff wants to know if you receive."

"Let him come in," said Lydia.

CHAPTER II

A SCENE OR TWO

THE front door of the "Yellow Castle" was unlocked. Efime stood in the hall tugging on a pair of clean, white gloves. Madame Gortchnikova's maid, who had been sent to her village home while her mistress was in town, smoothed her ribbons before the long mirror and examined the embroidery of her Little Russian costume. In the dining-room, Seraphima Profirovna smoked cigarettes and talked to Minnie Carey, who wanted her breakfast badly, and wished the travellers would come and have done with it. The ogre himself was invisible, but he was peeping from behind the blinds of his study window to catch the first glimpse of the returning sledge. When he did so, he let the blind fall with an impatient exclamation, thrust his hands into his pockets, and paced the room. Efime, hearing the jingle of the bells, drew aside the portière, and flung the door open. Pasha, the maid, moved forward quickly, ready for shawls and hand-luggage, and stood by Efime's side, staring as blankly as he did at the empty sledge. The

coachman—looking twice his usual bulk and importance in his bright blue, wadded caftan and three-cornered velvet hat—looked up as he whirled past, holding the reins far apart, and formed the word “telegram” with lips which dared not shout.

“Shut that door, you gaping, triple idiot!” cried an angry voice across the hall; the front door was closed hurriedly, and Efime entered the dining-room.

“Shall I serve the coffee, Seraphima Profirovna? Her Excellency has not come.”

“Now that ’s just like her, putting everybody out for nothing! This is the second time, is n’t it—Efime? So silly of her to put Vladimir in a bad temper from the very beginning. Of course, they ’ll quarrel now from the very first day of her return. Yes, Efime, bring in the coffee. You ’re hungry, I suppose, my dove.”

“Rather,” said Minnie, who was congratulating herself on having one more day of liberty.

Vladimir Vladimirovich put in an appearance at lunch in a most execrable temper. He gave Minnie his views upon wifely duty in forceful English and at great length, and complained vigorously and unreservedly of the shortcomings of Maria Alexandrovna.

“If she does n’t mean to be a proper wife to me, let her go her own way,” he said. “Yet she ’ll come back when it suits her, with soft sayings

about having been unavoidably detained and so wearily dull without me! I hate such comedies! I'll bet my head she went to a dance or a theatre last night, though she telegraphed—'Marusia too ill to travel.' That's all rot, I know. An old song. Aunt—"he turned suddenly to Seraphima Profirovna—"that's an old song, is n't it, about Marusia being too ill to travel?"

Through the rough mockery of his voice pierced a note of real anxiety.

"Of course, of—course," drawled Seraphima Profirovna, placidly. "Mària always makes that sort of excuse. Remember, Vladimir, that last year you went to Peter——"

The ogre struck his hand on the table, making Efime and the glasses jump and Seraphima Profirovna break off in the middle of a word. She would never have been so disrespectful to the City of Saint Peter as to give it the students' diminutive.

"Don't remind me that I was a triple fool!" growled the ogre, who naturally did not like to remember the hurried and anxious journey he had taken on receipt of a telegram in which his wife had alleged her own illness as an excuse for her non-arrival. His unexpected appearance in the small hours had disturbed a gay after-theatre supper, and the consequent scene Lydia, at least, would never forget. Mària Alexandrovna was one of those women who forget everything, and

who are evidently not fools, as experience never teaches them.

"Efime, thou idiot," he said, shaking off unpleasant reminiscences—"why is there no champagne on the table?"

"The bottles which I brought up from the cellar last week are finished, Vladimir Vladimirovich."

"Why did n't you say so before, ass? Go and bring half a dozen more. And don't imagine you can rob me with impunity. I know how much wine I have in my cellars, and if there's a deficiency, I'll make it up out of your wages. Be off!"

When the wine was brought he drank a glass or two in silence, and then began to chuckle.

"I'll give her a surprise!" he said. "Aunt, upon my word, I'll go to Petersburg this evening. I'll go and see the boy, poor little devil! I remember that hateful Lyceum! Upon my word, I'll go."

"But Maria will be home in a day or two. She can't put it off much longer. She said three weeks, and now it's six. Next week is Christmas. She must be home for Christmas."

"That's her own affair. I sha'n't be. She need n't think I can be always at her beck and call. To-day is not the first time I've waited for her in vain,—sent the horses, too, and opened the doors. I'm going to Petersburg, I tell you. I'm

master of my own actions, I presume. Have you anything to say against it?"

His tone was sarcastically defiant.

"Nothing in particular," said Seraphima Profirovna, placidly. "Only, of course, Mária will be surprised."

"Tell her I've gone for the good of my nerves," chuckled the ogre.

"When will you be back?"

"When my nerves are better."

"But the New Year——"

"Confound the New Year! I'm master of my own actions, I tell you. If I don't choose to be home for the New Year, I sha'n't be. The boy and I will spend it together in Petersburg. Ha, ha!—Mària Alexandrovna, I also can go about a little when I'm bored; and you've bored me with your telegrams."

He drank another glass of champagne.

"Well, Miss Carey, our after-dinner English club is broken up for the present. Good-bye. I must go and pack. Efime, send Pasha to me. Lively!"

He threw his *serviette* upon the table and rose, pushing his chair back noisily.

"Well—it serves Mária right, but she'll be wild," said Seraphima Profirovna. "She's always gadding about herself, but she's jealous of him. They quarrelled really seriously three years ago, and he went abroad for months—to America and Heaven knows where. She said she was glad, and

filled the house with visitors, and was always going to town, and pretended she was having a good time. But she was wild! And she'll be wild now. Well, it serves her right. Of course she went to the theatre. Efime, pour me out another glass of *vodka*, it's good for my digestive organs, *galoobchick*."

It was Efime who was a "little dove" this time, not Minnie. He poured out the *vodka* impassively. He really did n't care much whether he was a "little dove" or a "thrice-cursèd fool." It was all in the day's work.

Seraph ma Profirovna was right. Madame Gortchnkova had gone to the opera. Peter Petrovich Korsakoff had brought a ticket for a box.

"My chief let me have it," he said to Lydia. "He meant to go with his family, but something happened to prevent them. I have n't a family, of course, and I can't spread myself over all the six chairs. Perhaps Maria Alexandrovna will come with you and your sister and Mademoiselle—and Fräulein—" This was in reply to a quick glance from the German.

"We are going home this evening," said Lydia.

"So Maria Alexandrovna said," remarked Peter, son of Peter, with a slight smile. The Gortchnikovas had been "going home this evening" several times. "Mademoiselle, will you be glad

to get back to the country? You look as if town does not agree with you."

Peter Petrovich—to Madame Gortchnikova's great annoyance—treated Mademoiselle exactly as he treated all the young ladies he met in Society. He really did not seem to know the difference between a *dvorianka* with a rich father and a French nobody, Madame Gortchnikova declared aggrievedly.

Mària Alexandrovna, soothed by Nicolas Gregorovich and some drops, rustled into the room, serene and smiling. She could be absolutely overcome by hysteria one minute and affable and suave the next.

"Ah, Peter Petrovich, how do you do?" she said sweetly, as the young assistant-professor kissed her hand.

When he explained the object of his visit, she accepted the ticket at once, frowning down the objections she saw trembling on Lydia's lips.

"You little fool!" she said to her daughter later on. "You are like an old woman already! Why should you wish me to refuse a little pleasure? We don't get much distraction shut up as we are in Bielovka, except for a few weeks won by superhuman exertions on my part."

"I don't want pleasure, I want happiness," said Lydia. "And is it really pleasure? Of course Marusia will make us all late, and we shall have a scene with papa when we get back. He

must have received your letter saying we will be home to-morrow."

"What a coward you are!" cried her mother, whose *dame-de-classe* strictness as regards Lydia and her governesses was strangely mingled with an eager, childish desire for distraction. She was pettishly bewildered at her own continual unhappiness, and had less idea than most children as to what she really wanted. She thought she was dull in the country, and that in town her unhappiness would vanish; yet when, after many scenes, she had induced her husband to let her spend a winter in Petersburg, where she thought her name and riches would have opened the doors of Society to her, she had only made doubtful acquaintances, been cheated right and left, and vaguely felt herself as helpless and ignorant as a lost child. In spite of her thirty-seven years, she was, as her husband had told Minnie, "a middle-aged *Instituteka*," while the ogre himself, with all his bluster, was a great, perverse boy, and the very man of all men who should never have been Maria Alexandrovna's husband.

"Why do you repulse Peter Petrovich?" she asked Lydia, vexedly.

"Mamma!" exclaimed Lydia, with weary impatience, "pray, don't begin again!"

"I am a mother—your mother—your unhappy mother," cried Maria Alexandrovna, pathetically clasping her hands, and so evidently beginning a

long speech that Lydia's face settled down into the look of hard indifference with which she had schooled herself to witness these demonstrations. "What other object has a mother but her daughter's happiness? I can—alas!—expect no help from your father. He laughs at your suitors and sends them away; calls them fortune-hunters because they expect a decent dowry with a wife. That is quite natural. When a man marries he has a position to keep up, and his wife must be well dressed. Only eccentrics like your father marry girls without a dowry. Of course love is nonsense; worse—it is really quite indecent. I hope you have no such unmaidenly thoughts in your head, Lydia."

"Then it is unmaidenly to think of marriage," retorted Lydia, in spite of herself. "Yet——"

"Marriage is quite a different thing. It gives a woman position and—if she does n't marry a '*chudak*,' as I had the misfortune to do—liberty. What will your life be if you don't marry? You will live in the country nearly all the time—your father is comparatively young yet, and gets more difficult about letting us go to town every year. And you 'll be as unhappy as I am, and worse—because you 'll be an old maid."

Lydia had an answer ready—the ground of all her hope and patience,—but she wisely kept silence. Bitter experience had shown her that the subject was dangerous.

“If your father had had a little tact,” went on Maria Alexandrovna, now fairly started, “and had given hints of your receiving a reasonable dowry—for we are really very rich; but I’m sure I don’t know how the money goes; we don’t live up to our income I know, and what he means to do with it all I’m sure I don’t know—well, I was saying if your father had hinted about your having a good dowry, instead of shouting out to every one that you ’ll have none to speak of, André Andrévich would have proposed for you last year. That would have been a good marriage for you! An officer of the Guards, of a fine old family and large estate.” (She did not add, mortgaged to its last inch.) “But that’s a lost chance now. What you must think of at present is your chance with Peter Petrovich. He has a very decent position. His chief is very old and ill and always going to foreign watering-places. Of course he is not quite in our set” (the country gentry look with suspicion upon the “intelligence,” and the “intelligence”—though often themselves sons of squires—regard the country gentry with amused scorn), “but still I suppose he will be a professor in about ten years or so, and a professor is a civil general and a hereditary noble with the title of Excellency. Therefore I must entreat you not to throw away your chance with Peter Petrovich. His set does not have such expenses as an officer of the Guards has, so that most

likely he will be content with the trifle your father will give you on your marriage. I can give you something, too. Mala Roosava does not bring me in much—but I can do something for you. Not enough to satisfy an officer of the Guards, of course. Your father must absolutely give you a splendid trousseau, so that altogether I think Peter Petrovich will be satisfied.”

“Mamma!” cried Lydia, with an uncontrollable flash of disgust. “You talk like a Moscow merchant’s wife.”

“Have I deserved this? Why do I live to hear myself reviled by my own daughter? I do but seek your happiness, and you turn upon me with insults! Oh, thou ungrateful one!”

Madame Gortchnikova gasped and crushed the guipure on her bosom, but, remembering in time that she must dress for the theatre, she recovered herself.

Now the apprelling of Marusia for any social function or amusement was an anxious labour long-drawn out. The chambermaid especially attached to the Gortchnikovas was given up entirely to Marusia, while Fräulein and Mademoiselle were pressed into the service of Madame. Lydia dressed herself, not refusing a finishing touch or two from Claire’s deft French fingers.

Immediately after the six o’clock dinner Marusia began her toilette; at eight she still sat in her dressing-jacket, polishing her nails. Madame

Gortchnikova had alternately ordered and coaxed her to be quicker till the spoilt girl had simply turned her out of the room.

"I can do nothing if you worry me. Go away and leave me in peace," she said, pettishly, when her mother returned.

"But, you miserable girl, it is eight o'clock, and the opera begins at half-past."

"We can come in late," drawled Marusia, examining the nail she had been polishing for the last half-hour. Then, glancing at herself in the mirror, she added: "I don't like the way you've done my hair, Dasha. Give me the tongs, and I will do it myself."

Madame Gortchnikova stamped her foot.

"Marusia—unhappy girl!" she screamed.

"What is the good of making yourself nervous, mamma?" asked Lydia, coming into the room in a grey cloth dress dashed with strawberry colour. Full evening dress is not usually worn for the opera in Russia. "You know it is always the same thing with Marusia. She always makes us late, even for dinners, which is worst of all. Either leave her at home or make up your mind to miss the first two acts."

"I won't be left at home, you pig!" screamed Marusia, waving her curling-tongs wildly.

The rest was confusion. Weeping, gnashing of teeth, wringing of hands, breaking of scent-bottles, polygot revilings and consolations, Nicolas

Gregorovich, soothing drops, calm, smiles, and departure.

“How late you are!” exclaimed Peter Petrovich, meeting them at the door of the box. “I had given you up.”

Maria Alexandrovna smiled apologetically and looked with motherly concern at Marusia.

“The poor child had a bad attack of neuralgia. Happily it passed in time, or, if not quite in time——”

She sat down without finishing her sentence, and lifted her opera-glass.

CHAPTER III

CHANGELING

DOWN the narrow path which led from his house to the river Max walked quickly, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his short furred and braided jacket, and his cap with ear-flaps pulled down low on his forehead. The limitless whiteness around him gleamed in the uncertain moonlight of the cloudy night, and the wind came in whistling gusts across the steppe, wailing through the silence.

When Max was worried or vexed nothing soothed him like space and silence, and under their influence the telegram crushed between his fingers gradually lost its power of troubling.

He looked up at the scudding clouds, through shifting rents of which the stars shone fitfully, and drew a long breath of the icy air.

"At least they cannot alter all this," he said, half aloud, and his gaze fell from the troubled sky to the calm steppe.

When a young man—peace-loving, and with a vivid, masculine horror of storms in teacups—finds himself threatened with an invasion of three

women, who would all disagree with the fourth already installed, and fill his quiet house with bickerings and gossip from morning till night, interfering with his servants, questioning his management, complaining of his simple way of living, and poisoning his days with infinitesimal drops of gall, he may be excused if he forgets in the first moments of irritation that the invaders are his mother and his mother's daughters.

"What possesses her?" he had exclaimed, perplexedly to Vèra. "To talk about 'retrenching' is all rot; the journey costs more than she saves in other ways. And I thought we would have another three weeks together—you and I, and Petrusha—for the holidays. Of course he must come just the same! But it's all a horrid bore! If it were only the mother and Floria, it would not matter. I can manage mother pretty well, but the other two are too much for me. Not that Julietta disturbs any one much, poor girl! but the mother is always making her scenes, and then she cries. I hate seeing a girl cry!"

He was intensely annoyed, but as he paced beside the fettered river in the snowy stillness of the winter night, by degrees all petty worries slipped away from him.

"I wonder what makes some women so petty," he mused. "Russian women seem to me to be divided into two classes: The broad-minded and intellectual, who take their rights—and more—

without making any fuss or asking any one's opinion, and the irritatingly petty, who seem sent into the world to worry men as flies do horses. Really, I don't know any type between the two. Leda, perhaps; but she's still too green for classification. That little English girl is something different. She has more in her than I thought at first. I judged her sparkling and shallow as the river in July. But——"

His musings grew too indistinct and dreamy to help him to classify Minnie. Pictures of her crowded into his mind. He saw her cosily ensconced in the dingy railway carriage,—skimming over the river, flushed and gay,—sitting on the shabby divan in his study, drinking golden tea and talking slang and swear-words,—playing intricate melodies with half-closed eyes and fluffy head a little on one side, and—longest of all this picture stayed with him—as he had parted with her two nights ago, the swinging lantern-flashes showing her pensive and pale, with drooped lids hiding eyes that were strangely sad. He had caught glimpses of the sadness in the shaded lamplight of his room, where she had sat the whole evening, quiet for the most part, listening to Vèra's talk of St. Petersburg, or playing tumultuous music that clutched at the heart like a proud appeal.

He turned suddenly on his heel, as a cloud blotted out the moon, and a small head, framed

in filmy white, rose up from the ground at his feet. For a second he was surprised into motionless silence; then, as the whole figure became visible: "Is it you, Miss Minnie?" he said, and his voice sounded strange in his own ears.

"Is it you, Maximillian Ardilionovich?" she said, like an improvised echo. "It's as dark as pitch. You look misty and awful."

"And you stand there like a white-hooded elf."

He could see nothing but the vague, formless outline of her figure, and the white shawl round her head. But, looking at it, he imagined a pensive face with white, drooped lids. The illusion was so like reality that he moved nearer and gazed down into eyes that were raised to his, dark blue pools of sadness, and longing, and reproach. "Why did you take my mask for myself?" they said.

To save his life he could not have spoken at that moment, which was no moment to him. It seemed to him dimly that he had been moving nearer to that elf-like figure, looking down into those liquid eyes for an eternity, and that all else had been a dream. Or was he dreaming now? The clouds slipped away from the moon, and a shaft of light showed Minnie's face, flushed and gay, beneath her shawl.

"My pupils have not come," she said, with a laugh. "And the ogre has gone. I have a few

more days' freedom. I'm most awful glad. Liberty for ever!"

The sight of that cheerful face where he had been gazing into mystic eyes burning through the darkness deepened his sense of unreality. Would she change again? Was she not a changeling, an elf of the moonlight, the free spirit of the fettered stream?

"Are you frozen, Maximilian Ardilionovich? You stand so still. B-r-r! It's cold! I'm going to see Vèra Ardilionovna. *Au revoir.*"

She flitted away from him. As in a dream and still silent he followed, and caught her up in three strides. He put out his hand—we are always daring in dreams—and, taking her by the arm, drew her closer to him. The living touch did not chase away his dream, nor did her protest, spoken though it was in language that should surely have clashed with the vague poetry of his mood.

That mood reacted upon her. She walked quietly beside him through the alternately silvered and misty whiteness, and the only sounds that could be heard were the far-reaching echoes of their footsteps and the wailing of the wind as it blew the snow in their faces. The dream-feeling passed from him to her. To her, too, it seemed as if she had been walking by his side for ages through a wilderness of wind-tossed whiteness, and the vague conviction that so it would be for ever did not disturb her in the least.

When they came into the warm light of the hall, it dazzled their eyes strangely. Vèra came forward and took off Minnie's shawl.

"Are n't you frozen?" she asked.

"Your brother is," replied Minnie, with a laugh.

"Or he is in a bad temper."

"He has received an unpleasant telegram."

"Like the ogre."

"Where is your lantern?" asked Vèra.

"I did not bring it because there is a moon. But it lights badly," said Minnie, in her uncertain Russian.

"What did you say about the ogre and a telegram?" said Vèra, leading the way into the study.

Once more she was sitting on the shabby divan, weaving slang and swear-words into her account of the ogre's departure. Max, watching her, came gradually back to realities.

"Did you think me an absolute idiot?" he asked her as they recrossed the river. "To begin with, your appearance was so unexpected. I thought your pupils had returned and our nice evenings were over; and then I was affected by the air. Ask Vèra; she knows that when I've been out for hours, as I was to-day, the air goes to my head. Makes me tipsy in fact. It's no joke, our steppe air, you know."

"Yes, it is rather exhilarating," admitted Minnie.

Then she reflected that "exhilarating" was scarcely the word to express the strange, dreamy sensation that had held her as she had walked with him through the whirling snow that night.

CHAPTER IV

PETRUSHA

PETER PETROVICH KORSAKOFF, assistant-professor of meteorology, and astronomer for pure love, lay sound asleep in a room darkened to artificial night by heavy, closed shutters. It was nearly one o'clock, but he had been up till the late winter dawn in the Observatory tower with a lad who seemed to Korsakoff to be the reincarnation of his own youth. A dozen years ago he had been just such a raw, enthusiastic lad, whose eyes—dazzled by the stars—were blind to all else. Now, though he still followed science for pure love and could at times forget everything else in its pursuit, familiarity had bred not contempt, but serenity, and his eyes, accustomed to the light, could distinguish other objects. He had drawn nearer to life. Youth—the youth of the late teens and the early twenties—is for many men who go in for the higher education far from being that period of irresponsible and thoughtless pleasure-seeking supposed by convention. It is rather a time of restlessness, of arrogant disdain for the small things of this world,—which, after all, so largely make up happiness,—of immeasurable

and sometimes vague ambitions, of a reckless sacrifice of the present to that wonderful future which eternally recedes, and often simply of dogged work, a course of lectures, reading, and examinations, a tense endeavour for the diploma which costs four or five years of work.

The taste of life, like that of caviare and olives, is acquired by degrees.

It had taken Korsakoff about a dozen years to find out that a man works all the better after a spell of frivolous recreation or mere idleness, that the everyday affairs of this planet are worthy of a certain amount of attention, and that there are many subjects of great interest besides his own specialty.

It is a lesson many scientists never learn.

He lay in dreamless sleep when a young man came into the room, stumbled over a chair, and swore.

"Petrusha, eh Petrusha! Wake up! What Egyptian darkness! Where the deuce is the bed? I want to come and pull you out. Petrush—a!"

"Don't receive," murmured Korsakoff, sleepily, but when it dawned upon him that his man was not given to calling him "Petrusha," he sat up with a tremendous yawn.

"Who's there?" he asked.

A match flashed and went out, and a voice called in the darkness, "And it's the last. Confound it!"

"Max!" cried Korsakoff, groping for the matches and lighting the candle. Max crossed the room and sat down on the bed.

"You're a regular owl, Petrusha! Here—get up! I want you to come with me and meet the duchess." Max sometimes gave his mother her title in imitation of Seraphima Profirovna and Maria Alexandrovna, for whom he knew he was merely "the duchess's son."

Petrusha whistled. "What's she coming here for? In the winter, too?"

"How do I know? I only know she's here, or will be at six o'clock. Come with me, Petrusha. You know it will put her in a good temper if you meet her."

"H—um!" growled Petrusha. "She'll be asking me my intentions if I continue 'putting her in a good temper.' I did plenty of that the summer before last, and I know she did n't think it was for love of you."

"Be calm. My brother-in-law thou shalt never be," Max assured him. "But get up, you lazy fellow, and give me lunch. I'm ravenous. I've been travelling all night."

Korsakoff had a suite of three rooms at the Meteorological Station on the outskirts of the town, close to the river, and the drive through the morning air had had a *zakouska-like* effect upon Max's appetite.

Korsakoff stifled a yawn. "All right," he said,

resignedly. "Take your feather weight off the bed, and I'll get up."

Max took a last critical look at his friend before obeying. "Don't know what the effect will be when you are dressed, but, as you are, that short beard suits you," he said. "But why will you always cut your hair so close that you look like a Zaporozhe without the tuft?"

"It's so confoundedly curly if I don't, and an assistant-professor has no business with curls. We leave them to students—and country bumpkins."

Max laughed, impervious to the insult, jumped up from the bed, and made a dash for the shutters, letting in a flood of winter sunshine.

"Petrusha," he declared. "I've found you a suitable wife. Marusia Gortchnikova. She always sleeps till one o'clock."

"Are you yearning for the touch of a boot on your head?" growled Petrusha, poisoning the article in question. "Men are fools, but the fool has yet to be born who will marry Marusia Gortchnikova."

"Oh, thou suckling! She's had three suitors already, but Vladimir Vladimirovich put them to flight by saying he did not mean to give her any dowry to speak of. But if her marriage portion was in proportion to her father's fortune, she would have been married four years ago. Why, one of the Ostrougoffs, Nico's uncle, married a hunchback. She had an estate of ten thousand *desiatines* and never a debt. Lucky creature!"

sighed Max, in parenthesis, thinking of his own burdened estate. "And when Ostrougoff died she married again in a year, and when her second husband died she married a third. She's a widow again now, and if the law allowed it, I bet my head she'd get a fourth husband, for all her deformity and her forty and odd years."

"Rot," commented Korsakoff, briefly.

"Hard fact—on my word," Max assured him.

Petrusha was too engrossed in the mysteries of the toilet to continue the subject.

Ever since they had been students together, though in different faculties and courses, Korsakoff having gone in for mathematics and Max for natural science, these two had been friends, had shared rooms and sometimes uniforms, though Max was taller than Korsakoff and not quite so broad. They had each had the princely allowance of forty roubles a month, and lived on it without much straining of obstinate ends, for a Russian student scorns "aristocratism" and luxury with a Spartan scorn.

"Of course," said Max, at lunch, "you'll come to us for Christmas just the same. You'll be a pig if you don't."

The assistant-professor poured himself out a glass of Bessarabian wine, corked the bottle with precision,—he was very accurate,—and spoke in his most professorial tones.

"My promise was given unconditionally and

will be kept. There is no need for you to have recourse to unbecoming language, Maximillian Ardilionovich."

Max aimed a bread-pellet at him. "Oh, thou blessed innocent! Happy are the students thou shalt examine. They shall all receive 'fives,'* and be exceedingly glad. On my word, Petrusha, I know you could never 'cut' a fellow."

A Russian student is not "ploughed," but "cut."

"If he answers badly——"

"You 'll help him out and give him 'three.'"

Petrusha smiled in his beard, but said, with professional gravity: "I have no right to pass the incompetent. Heavens! How ignorant some students are! It's a wonder to me how they scramble through the course. You, for example——"

"Now, don't lie," said Max, cheerily. "I own that in some subjects I escaped cutting by the skin of my teeth. A fellow can't know everything. Anatomy, for instance, never interested me. But I was always pretty well up in botany, zoölogy, and geology. Besides, I never meant to serve, except in the Zemski, where I hope to be elected when I put my affairs a bit straight. But, as you know, I went through the University mostly for the look of the thing. A fellow—be he ten

* 5 is the highest mark given at exams. 3 passes, but less means failure.

times noble—is nothing nowadays without ‘the higher education.’ Look at Nico Ostrougoff, for instance. That type of petty squire is getting rarer, thank Heaven! Though I hear it is pretty common in Bessarabia.”

“What new enormity has Nico Ostrougoff committed?” asked Petrusha.

“Nothing new. Always the same thing. Making the priest drunk and quarrelling with him, beating the peasant lads and taking their sweethearts from them. To speak the simple truth, Nico’s a brute.”

“A handsome brute,” amended Petrusha.

“Oh, they’re all like that. Beautiful as Northern gods, these Ostrougoffs. Tall and supple, with eyes like flower of the flax, and hair and moustache like corn ready for reaping. I remember Nico’s father. He was close upon sixty, but a picture to look at! Curling white hair, keen blue eyes, fresh colour. *Molodetz!* Rode fifty versts and thought nothing of it.”

“He died comparatively early, all the same,” said Korsakoff.

“No man is proof against chills even if he’s lived all his life on the steppe. You get soaked to the skin and are none the worse for it nine times out of ten, but the tenth settles you.”

“How many times have you been soaked?” asked Petrusha, gravely. “Look out, keep count, and beware of the tenth time.”

“How can one talk sensibly to a howling scientist?” demanded Max, in despair. “Take a cigarette and shut up.” He handed his case to Korsakoff, and the two smoked in silence for a time.

“I can’t think what possesses my mother,” said Max, at length; he had been trying to puzzle out the reason of the duchess’s arrival. “To come in the depth of winter to the heart of the steppes! Why—why—why?”

“How should I know?” demanded Petrusha.

But though he knew it not, Petrusha himself was one of the reasons.

The duchess’s creditors were becoming quite clamorous,—her dressmaker had refused to create another “confection” until her bill was settled, and the duchess reflected that, though she could not appear in her own aristocratic set in dresses of doubtful freshness and last season’s fashion, she might yet wear them to the admiration of the smaller steppe squires. Two eligible young men who had been among her visitors, thereby arousing hopes that they might some day be her sons-in-law, had married other women’s daughters, leaving her disconsolate, to face the extra expenses her deceptive hopes had led her to incur with her usual recklessness. For a space she had given herself up to despair. “I shall never get you married,” she had exclaimed hopelessly to Leonora and Julietta. “You must both

be extraordinarily stupid. You are not pretty, unhappily, but it is not always beauty which attracts. Look at—," she named two fortunate and plain rivals. "Goodness only knows what makes men fall in love; not goodness—often not beauty—simply devilry, I believe."

"You surely don't wish us to be *endiablées*, mamma," remarked Leonora, primly.

"I don't care what you are so long as you 're not old maids," said her mother, pettishly. "But it seems that 's just what you will be."

But hope springs eternal in the human breast, and, as the duchess's thoughts went back to her native steppe, she remembered that there were one or two desirable young men in the neighbourhood of her son's estate. True, Max lived ridiculously simply, entertained very little, and only kept up a certain intercourse with the smaller squires whose incomes were not much larger than his own; still a steppe squire, be his income ever so modest, is always a *dvorianine* and as such not to be despised as a son-in-law when higher hopes have failed. There was young Ostrougoff, for example. He would soon be finding out that he wanted a wife—wild young men often tire of their wildness when they have passed five-and-twenty—and whom was he to marry? He was "beautiful as a Northern god," but the rich squires—Gortchnikoff, for example—would look higher for their daughters, and the duchess could

not call to mind one of the smaller landowners whose girls were likely to attract Ostrougoff. Of course he would not marry into a merchant's family—it is only ruined Guardsmen who will do that, to save themselves, by means of their wife's dowry, from being obliged to leave the regiment. Looking at things all round from a standard lowered by hope deceived, the duchess decided that Nico was eligible.

Having disposed of Ostrougoff, she remembered Petrusha. Two years ago, when he had been but a young man in search of an appointment, she had not thought him worth particular attention; but Max had mentioned in his last letter that Petrusha—now an assistant-professor—was going to spend Christmas at Bielovka.

“It's a very good position,” she mused. “My daughters might do worse. As he is a man of no family, he will be only too glad to marry the daughter of the Duchesse di Santa Ferrara. These scientists don't usually care much about money. I do not think he will be difficult to manage.”

She remembered Petrusha as a shy young man, with brusque accesses of gaiety and gallantry. A mixture of savage and scientist. His expression, far-away and thoughtful at times, often flashed into wideawake alertness. All his movements had something of the same contrast. Of medium height and compact, powerful build, he walked lazily, with his broad shoulders bent, but sometimes

his step had that swinging swiftness and his head that arrogant pose which usually characterise the Cossack. He was remarkably easy-tempered, but once Nico Ostrougoff—who could not bear him—went too far in some rough banter, and Korsakoff lost patience. He swore a round oath, and caught the “Northern god” by both shoulders with a grip Ostrougoff could not shake off. “Here, let go, Korsakoff,” he said. “I was only joking.”

Petrusha loosened his grip slowly. “I don’t like such jokes,” he said, grimly. “Understand?”

Nico understood.

The duchess did not call to mind all these details, her powers of observation being too superficial to enable her to remark or understand them. Chief among her memories of Petrusha was the fact that he used to wear Russian blouses—Max had the same horrid habit in the summer—and that his hair was rather long and very curly.

When, stepping upon the station platform at X——, she lifted her lorgnette and looked round for Max, she saw him in company with a gentleman in a handsome furred cloak, whose face, with its short, pointed beard, seemed strange and yet familiar.

Floria rushed at Max, flung her arms round his neck, kissed him tempestuously, and showered Russian and Italian endearments upon him. His companion approached the rest of the group, and

lifting his fur cap revealed close-cropped, dark hair. The duchess looked a little stiff.

"Don't you know me, duchess?" he asked with a shy smile. "I am Korsakoff—Petrusha Korsakoff."

The duchess beamed upon him. "*Dio mio!* How you've changed!" she exclaimed, and thought to herself: "I did well to come. He is more than presentable."

CHAPTER V

A PRELIMINARY SKIRMISH

MÀRIA ALEXANDROVNA had returned home at last. Rustling up the steps she entered the door, flung back her richly furred mantle, and with both well-gloved hands outstretched made a little rush forward. But the "Voloda!" on her lips died away and she stopped short as in the dim light of the inner hall she saw only Seraphima Profirovna, who, with a cigarette between her lips, was watching her niece with calm curiosity.

"Where is Vladimir?" demanded the latter, sharply.

Seraphima Profirovna took her cigarette out of her mouth, flicked off the ash, and drawled, "In Petersburg, my dove."

In the background Pasha looked at Efime, over whose resigned features flitted the ghost of a grin.

Madame Gortchnikova put her clasped, gloved hands to her heart, and there was a sound of the ripping of kid as she fell back against one of the lamp-pedestals, and echoed, "In Petersburg!" Then as a second thought flashed across her mind,

she added, with real anxiety, "Is Pavloosha ill?"

"There's nothing the matter with the boy, praise be to God!" drawled Seraphima Profirovna, with placid piety. "Vladimir was only tired of waiting for you."

"You horrid old woman!" snapped Maria Alexandrovna, "I believe you are mocking me."

Seraphima Profirovna gave an offended grunt, and putting her cigarette between her lips, turned to go into the dining-room. Lydia ran after her.

"Don't be offended, grandmamma," she said. "You know mamma is nervous. But is it really true that papa has gone to Petersburg?"

Seraphima Profirovna did not resent the question from Lydia. She knew her darling was merely expressing surprise and not doubting her veracity.

"True, by heaven!" she asserted. She broke the third commandment as frequently as a peasant but "*ey Boga*" is untranslatable.

Lydia followed her into the dining-room.

"Stepanida," said Madame Gortchnikova, in a tremulous voice, to a tall, thin woman, neatly dressed in black, "take me to my room."

Stepanida, a new "town" maid, came forward and supported her mistress. "Where is your Excellency's room?" she asked in the voice of a well-trained servant.

"I know that," put in Pasha, with a toss of her smooth head, "and *Barin* left me the keys."

"Pasha," sighed M^aria Alexandrovna, in a scarcely audible voice, "you will wait on the young ladies."

Pasha did not know whether to be sorry or glad. Her Excellency was a difficult mistress; Lydia Vladimirovna would no doubt be an easy one, but M^aria Vladimirovna!

"I would rather serve the devil himself," thought Pasha.

As the procession moved across the hall there was a slight commotion at the front door, caused by the arrival of Mademoiselle and Fr^aulein, who had come in the small, one-horse sledge.

"Fr^aulein," quavered M^aria Alexandrovna over her shoulder, "come to me in my room. I am overwhelmed."

When Lydia entered the dining-room Minnie was standing at one of the windows looking out.

"That's your new English teacher. She's rather a nice little thing," said Seraphima Profirovna.

Lydia bowed stiffly and held out her hand. Minnie's warm blue eyes met the gaze of eyes no less blue, but colder. "Rather a disagreeable girl," was her inward comment, and, indeed, Lydia's manner was almost repellant at times. She had learnt to be self-controlled in the midst of a shrieking sisterhood lorded over by a man

given to fierce fits of blustering rage, and the effort had hardened her young face till it looked older than her years and had given her manner a touch of aloofness.

"It was very *ennuyeux* here in the village, for you,—lonely?" she asked Minnie, who recalled the ogre's criticism of his daughters' English, and smiled as she replied, "Not in the least."

A silence followed. Both girls looked out of the window. Minnie was very sensitive for all her apparent self-possession, and though not in the least shy as a rule, was very much so with strangers who did not attract her. She had not felt a moment's awkwardness with Seraphima Profirovna or the ogre; the former had been too comically interesting to admit of the feeling, and the latter had won her instinctive liking. But with Lydia she felt different.

Lydia was thinking with amused irritation: "She is quite a child. Why, she must be younger than I am; and mamma will be cross because she is pretty."

Presently Mademoiselle entered with Marusia, and they all sat down to breakfast, Seraphima Profirovna beaming upon them from her crimson chair. Fräulein came in, put "Her Excellency's" breakfast on a tray, and went out again, leaving the young people to chatter French at their ease. Marusia looked less like a galvanised corpse than usual, and talked with a faint approach to

animation; but Minnie, looking at the grey-streaked hair, dull, sunken eyes, and bad teeth, could scarcely believe that Marusia was a girl in the early twenties.

But she straightway fell in love with Mademoiselle, who was worthy of that "Midi" to which she belonged by blood, though born and bred in Paris. Madame Gortchnikova was always vexed at Mademoiselle's prettiness, and often declared that she would never again engage a governess without having a personal interview, or at least a photograph. Minnie had sent hers, which was most unflattering. She was one of those people who always take badly, and in a photograph the charm of colour and mobile expression is lost.

After breakfast, Leda, Mademoiselle, and Pasha began the work of unpacking and arranging. Marusia lay down on her bed and closed her eyes. Minnie tried to draw her into conversation in vain, and, at length, finding she was not in the least wanted, she went to her own room, and, having put it in order, sat down by the stove to read Gorki's latest novel, which Max had lent her.

She had not turned over more than three or four pages before a shadow fell across the window, the door creaked, and Fräulein—whom Minnie had taken for Madame Gortchnikova's maid—entered the room.

"Please come to Her Excellency," she said.

Minnie rose quietly, put her book back on the

table, and accompanied the German to the house and into Mária Alexandrovna's boudoir.

The lady sat leaning languidly back on a soft, low divan; the loose sleeves of her white and gold peignoir disclosed white, shapely arms; for the rest she was neither pretty nor ugly. As Minnie entered she did not change her languid attitude, but said in a voice whose acid sharpness clashed with her pretty pose, "What means this, miss?"

"I don't understand you," said Minnie, serenely.

Mária Alexandrovna would have gained in dignity if she had spoken French or Russian, but it was one of her rules never to speak to a governess in any but the latter's mother-tongue.

"I would say how dare you to go away and leave the ladies? It is your duty to be with them as much as only is possible. Remember yourself, please, here you are a governess and not a guest."

The tone was very nasty and the injustice glaring. One of the conditions of Minnie's engagement was that she was to have reasonable free time, and what time could be more reasonable than the present when her pupils were unpacking and talking French and Russian? Minnie had been very lucky hitherto as a governess, having met with that hearty, Russian hospitality which knows no distinction of persons. Here was a new experience. At first she was too taken aback to reply. Mária Alexandrovna misunderstood her silence, and grew nastier.

“And how dare you to change your room? It is not your affair to make petition unto mine husband. It was most not *comme il faut* of your part, miss. I am exceedingly astonished and offended of it. You are my governess, I am your mistress, and with my husband you have no affair. It is your duty to rest with the ladies and to remember yourself that you are a governess, and to conduct yourself so.”

Angry tears sprang to Minnie's eyes. Such vulgar shrewishness was not worthy of anything except calm, philosophical contempt; but it is difficult to be philosophical when blessed or cursed with a sensitive nature.

But sensitive though she was, Minnie's powers of retaliation came back to her with a rush of angry pride. “I will not be your governess another day,” she said in that very clear voice which is often a sign of deep anger. “I will leave your house immediately. If I pay my fare both ways and take no salary, I have the right to do so. This is the first time I have been spoken to in such a way, and I don't at all like it. Please remember, Madame Gortchnikova, that though I came here as your daughters' governess or companion, I did not come to be the butt of your ill-temper.”

She had decided her plans in a flash: To borrow twenty roubles from Vèra, and go to X——, the government town, where she knew there was a

governess's home, where she could stay till she found a place. She stood flushed with offended pride, but calmly awaiting a torrent of abuse in reply to her outburst.

But Mária Alexandrovna only struck the unarmed. Minnie's independence of manner led her to believe that the girl was in no need of money or friends and could more easily find another place than she herself could find another "real" English governess. Several ill-natured comments on her daughters' English had been made by those of her town acquaintances who were capable of forming an opinion on the matter, and her petty pride had been touched. She had sought for a suitable governess for some time, but as she would not offer more than thirty-five roubles a month the search had been in vain, till Minnie accepted her terms from sheer want of money to wait for a better offer.

"How insupportably proud these English are," thought Madame Gortchnikova, looking at Minnie's flushed and resolute face. "She is much prettier than her photograph and too young; but Vladimir wrote that she has a perfect accent. I must n't let her go yet."

She put on a helpless, childish expression, and said, pathetically: "Please, miss, not to be so offended. I, perhaps, expressed myself not well. I am very nervous, my dear. *Il faut me pardonner*. I am, in truth, quite ill. The voyage for the

whole night has destroyed me. And then to come to my home and find my husband is depart. You must not that pity me. I am, indeed, quite destroyed. You are not more angry, no? Sit down, and we will speak of the arrangements of the English lessons. I am a most ill and unhappy woman. You must not pay no attention if on occasion I speak I know not what."

Minnie half smiled and sat down. She had taken Mária Alexandrovna's measure. The latter bent forward and kissed her on the cheek. "What pretty *hairs* you have, my dear," she said.

CHAPTER VI

ANDRUSHA

MÀRIA ALEXANDROVNA gave herself up to hysterics and sulks for a couple of days, scarcely appearing in the dining-room at all, and depending upon Fräulein for consolation. The young people and Seraphima Profirovna passed the time in peace and concord, Mademoiselle and Minnie made friends, and the English girl's brightness thawed the ice between herself and Lydia. Between Minnie and Marusia there had been one skirmish, in which the former had come off with flying colours. On her "English" day, Marusia, as usual, stayed in bed in spite of Minnie's remonstrances, till the latter lost patience, and said, preparing to leave the room: "Stay in bed all day if you like and get as yellow as a guinea. It really does n't matter to me."

"Mamma will be angry if you leave me," said Marusia, sleepily, yet spitefully.

"What then?" was the serene retort.

"She will send you away."

"The world is wide," replied Minnie, with unruffled philosophy.

"Then go where you wish, and leave me in peace, you—you piece of blonde dirt!" cried Marusia, who found English sadly wanting in uncomplimentary expressions, and coined them herself with more or less success.

Minnie laughed. "How funny you are, Marusia! Worse than I am when I speak Russian," and she left the room quietly and spent the rest of the morning walking and reading.

"Where is Marusia?" asked Seraphima Profirovna, at lunch.

"In bed," said Minnie, quietly. "I did all I could to make her get up till she sent me out of her room; so I went."

"And a very good thing, too," asserted Seraphima Profirovna. "Marusia expects every one to fuss about her all day." She went to the door of her niece's room—"If you want lunch, come for it," she drawled. "I sha'n't keep any for you."

Coming back to the table she expressed her views as to the best method of curing Marusia, with much waving of her knife and fork. "I'd soon cure her if Maria would let me alone; but my niece makes scenes every day, and that only makes the girl worse. It's a kind of excitement for her."

"The old lady's intellect may be a little shaky as regards dogs," thought Minnie, "but she has a certain amount of common-sense, after all."

On the third day Maria Alexandrovna came into the dining-room just as Efime was bringing in the second course. Every one had been talking and laughing, but a silence fell upon them as she entered. "Why don't you go on talking?" she asked irritably as she took her seat. "Miss, I heard your voice. Speak!"

Now Minnie had been speaking Russian, and the laugh had been at one of her mistakes; besides, if you are commanded to speak as if you were a show parrot, the contrariness of human nature usually occasions temporary dumbness.

Madame Gortchnikova turned pettishly to her younger daughter. "Lydia, why don't you speak?"

"I hope you feel better, mamma," said Lydia, with cold obedience.

"Speak English, not Russian. It is your English day, I suppose, as Miss is sitting next to you. Speak: what were you talking about when I came in?"

"The conversation was general, mamma, and we were speaking Russian. You know grand-mamma does not understand English."

"There is to be no general conversation. Each of you is to speak to your companion of the day in the day's language. Now—speak English."

Lydia knew that silence would provoke a scene, so she had recourse to one of her childhood's tricks. Turning to Minnie, she said, gravely: "Miss, do you like strawberry jam?"

Minnie's eyes danced as she replied with equal gravity: "Yes; but I prefer pork-pies."

"What are pork-pies?" asked Madame Gortchnikova. Minnie explained.

"Do you not admire roses, Miss?" was Lydia's next question.

"Yes, exceedingly. The children of my aunt's gardener were accustomed to bring me several specimens of these beautiful flowers every morning. The lily is also worthy of admiration."

This conversation *à l'Ollendorf* continued at intervals all dinner-time. Madame Gortchnikova was satisfied.

"Aunt, what did Voloda say about New Year's Day?" she asked Seraphima Profirovna.

"He said that the devil might take it, and that he meant to spend it in Petersburg with Pavloosha," replied Seraphima Profirovna, in her usual placid drawl.

"If I had only known, I would have stayed in town another fortnight! We had such an attentive doctor, aunt. He was really quite devoted to me."

Seraphima Profirovna swooped down upon her glass of *vodka*, lifted it with her elbow extended even more than usual, and drank it off quickly.

"Pasha says the duchess and her daughters are here," resumed Maria Alexandrovna. "Girls, we'll call on them to-morrow. Marusia, mind you are ready by half-past two."

But the next day as the whole party was fussing round Marusia, an unexpected but thrice-welcome guest arrived. Mária Alexandrovna, standing at her boudoir window, saw a sledge coming over the hill from the direction of the district town.

"I wonder who that can be?" she thought, looking at the grey-cloaked figure in the sledge. "Stepanida, give me my opera-glass."

Her hand trembled as she held the glass to her eyes. "Can it be?" she murmured. "Yes—no—yes, it is; it is André Andréévich."

She ran into her daughters' room to see if they were sufficiently well dressed to receive an officer of the Guards; but when Tchisinsky arrived, and was shown into the boudoir, which served as a drawing-room on the rare occasions when there were guests at the "Yellow Castle," he found Mária Alexandrovna alone, deeply interested in the *Neva*.

"Whom do I see?" she exclaimed, throwing aside her magazine and extending her hand. "What a surprise! André Andréévich, welcome!"

"My purest respects!" said Tchisinsky, clinking his spurs as he bowed and raised her hand to his lips with a graceful sweep of his long, furred cloak.

"I am staying in X—— with my cousin," he explained. "And being so near—only a night's journey—I could not resist coming to pay you a visit."

"It was an excellent idea of yours. Of course,

"

we can offer you but poor entertainment here in the country. My husband is away, too, for a few days. But I hope you will remain with us till his return, at least."

As she gave this invitation, Mária Alexandrovna inwardly breathed a thanksgiving that her husband had left the key of the tower behind him.

"You are extremely good, Mária Alexandrovna, but I have put up at X——," he named the district town.

"I cannot dream of letting you remain in that horrid hotel,"—the town possessed but one,—“I will send one of my men for your things, and you must really pass Christmas with us.”

Here Efime brought in refreshments. Mademoiselle and Fräulein had been busy in pantry and cellar for the last quarter of an hour.

"You were going out, I believe," said André Andréévich. "I saw your sledge at the door."

"A visit to pay," said Madame Gortchnikova, with the air of a woman overwhelmed with social duties. "Would you like to come with us? The duchess will be delighted, of course; and, by the way, you know young Galovkine."

"Young Galovkine? Count Galovkine?"

"It is the same family, I believe, but an untitled branch. Don't you remember Maximillian Ardilionovich, a young squire, who lives across the river? You met him last year, I believe."

"Ah, yes! A red-cheeked youth, with curly

hair. I remember," said André Andréevich, condescendingly.

It did not require much pressing to induce Tchisinsky to stay at the "Yellow Castle." In fact, he had come with the intention of doing so. His affairs were in a bad way. If money were not forthcoming, and that quickly, he would be obliged to leave his expensive regiment. Gone would be the glory of clinking spurs and shining casque, gone the triumph of those soul-stirring moments when, on the Field of Mars, beneath the statue of Suwarov idealised as the God of War, he waved his sword and shouted "Ga-l-l-op!" to his men, careering at their head in a cloud of dust beneath the indulgent eyes of royalty itself. Gone would be the expensive suppers, the card-parties, the conquest of *demi-mondaines*—all that makes life worth living for a man of his stamp. "I had better put a bullet through my head," he said, gloomily, to his cousin and adviser.

"I tell you, Andrusha, the *chudak* of Bielovka is rich, enormously rich. I've made inquiries. The Lord only knows why he chooses to live like a rat in a hole. Squires with a tenth of his income spend half their time in Petersburg or abroad. Surely you might marry one of his daughters if you really wish to. Did you declare yourself last year?"

"Not I. From what I heard, it seems the girls won't get much."

“You ’re a fool, Andrusha,” his cousin assured him sweetly. “That ’s only *blague*. ‘My daughter must be loved for herself.’ I know the style! But when a suitor from *le beau monde* presents himself, the tone changes. ‘My daughter must be, to a certain extent, independent—your position involves great expense, etc. Mària Alexandrovna will be on your side. I know her. She is terribly afraid her girls won’t marry, shut up as they are for the greater part of the year, and blessed with such a *chudak* for a father. You take my advice, and go there again.”

“But,” objected Andrusha, “Lydia Vladimirovna does not seem to be the sort of girl I want for a wife. From the little I saw of her, she seems to have a decided temper and all sorts of foolish ideas. Now I want to marry a woman who will do me credit in Society, will accept my most respectful homage, and——”

“Ask no awkward questions. Aha, Andrusha! ’Pon my soul, I ’ve an idea. You are quite sure that you made no advances to Lydia Vladimirovna last year?”

“Scarcely spoke a dozen words to her in private. She is always surrounded by a French or German bodyguard. The Frenchwoman’s pretty, too. Quite my style.”

“And you did n’t commit yourself with Mària Alexandrovna?”

"Merely trotted out the usual compliments for her daughters. Not one serious word."

"Then propose for the other—the elder—Mària Vladimirovna."

"Good heavens! She's a fright—a wreck—a——"

"Not a fright at all; she has decent features and figure, and is not such a wreck as you think. You've only seen her in the country, where she is simply bored to death. I met her a few weeks ago at a Costume ball dressed *à la Pompadour*—you know the style, powdered hair, and the rest. She was excited by the attention she received, and 'pon my word, she was n't half bad. If I were not the father of a family, and bald-headed into the bargain, I would n't mind trying my luck. Pity she has such bad teeth, but a clever dentist can arrange that. You think of it, Andrusha. Mària Alexandrovna will be so delighted at your proposal that she will work upon her husband to be generous. Why, he could give his daughter an estate as large as Bielovka, and never miss it. Remember, too, that besides being rich, the Gortchnikoffs are of as good a family as you are yourself. A marriage with one of them will pose you well. Gortchnikoff may avoid Society as much as he likes, but he is of the old nobility, all the same."

Much more was said to the same effect, and the result was André Andréévich's arrival at Bielovka,

where, to every one's astonishment and Seraphima Profirovna's indignation,—she was offended by the slight to her favourite,—he paid marked attention to Marusia, who, under the stimulus of his feigned admiration, improved wonderfully.

“But papa is certain to spoil everything,” she remarked hopelessly to Minnie. “I might have been married years ago if he had not refused to give me a dowry.”

“That proves that your suitors wanted money, not you. You would not have been happy in such a marriage,” said Minnie, by way of consolation.

“How you are stupid!” exclaimed Marusia, pettishly. “Of course the men wish not to marry a *pauvrette*. There must be moneys for the establishment.”

Mària Alexandrovna's head was turned with triumphant joy. She held a council on the subject of André Andréévich's intentions.

“He says,” she declared to the assembled group of her daughters, Seraphima Profirovna, and the three governesses—“he says that Marusia attracted him at first by her expression of weary sadness, and then interested him by her occasional fits of gaiety and pretty maidenly coquetry. He said to me last night: ‘How happy is the man destined to transplant that delicate flower—fading for want of light and warmth—into the sunshine of the great world for which it was made!’”

She looked round for applause.

"Really quite poetical," said Minnie, her lashes hiding her dancing eyes.

"*C'est bien gentil*," was Mademoiselle's verdict.

"*Ach! Das ist sehr schön!*" gasped Fräulein, turning up her eyes.

"Brave words!" grunted Seraphima Profirovna, pausing in her walk to and fro. She never sat down in any room but her own and the dining-room, where a chair was kept sacred to her. "I wonder at you, Mária! How can you believe in such an empty barrel? Of course Vladimir was right in saying that he only wants money. Oh, he's a fine man to look at, though getting bald and not so young as he was, and his words drop out of his mouth like honey and butter. But he only wants money, and the Jews won't give him any more. So he will take Marusia's if he can, and spend it on abandoned women."

"Aunt," cried Mária Alexandrovna, solemnly, "remember you are speaking before innocent maidens!"

Seraphima Profirovna grunted again. "I'm a maiden myself," she drawled; "but for all that I know something about the ways of men. They are not all like Vladimir though you don't appreciate him, Mária. And if you think so much of Marusia's innocence, why do you want to give her to that evil liver?"

Marusia sat on a low stool at her mother's feet, listening with becomingly drooped eyes to the

discussion. Lydia kept a proud silence in the background.

"Aunt," began Mária Alexandrovna again, clasping her hands; "Aunt, how can you be so heartless? I am doing my best for my daughter's happiness, and——"

"Well, well—God with thee!" exclaimed the old lady. "Do what you like. I don't say but you're right to take any chance you can get for Marusia. God knows I don't wish to see her wither away an old maid like me. It's not too gay. Well, go on with your talk. What else did he say pretty? I won't interfere—*ey Boga*—I won't. There's the cross for you!"

She put her cigarette down, turned to the Holy Image in the corner, crossed herself, replaced her cigarette, and continued her walk.

"I have an idea," went on Mária Alexandrovna, turning to the listening group like an eager child. "This evening after dinner we will all go for a walk in the park. There will be moonlight at eight o'clock. Moonlight always acts upon the heart and makes it tender. Miss, you will walk with Marusia and André Andréévich, but, when I call you, leave them together. Of course we will not let them go out of sight—that would be improper—but far enough to let him speak a little to her *tête-à-tête*. And in the moonlight—the moonlight on the snow—don't you think it will have an influence, Miss?"

"Don't you think," hazarded Minnie, "that the effect will be rather—cold?"

"We shall be well wrapped up in furs. Marusia, put on your blue and white woollen hood. It suits you. Miss, I really think you are mistaken. The moon never chills. It is always used in novels for the love scenes."

As the conversation was general, Mária Alexandrovna spoke Russian, though each governess used her mother-tongue, according to Madame Gortchnikova's strict rule.

"I knew a young man," drawled Seraphima Profirovna,—“he was the son of Ivan Petrovich Petroff, and his mother was born a Princess Galitzine, though poor enough and not too pretty. He proposed one moonlight night to two girls and got into a dreadful muddle ending in a duel.”

"You see. It has an influence," said Mária Alexandrovna, triumphantly.

While this council was being held, the subject of it sat in a barely furnished room in the tower, writing letters. When he had finished writing the last address he walked to the window and looked out upon the white wilderness of snow tinged towards the west by the low, red rays of the setting sun.

"Beastly hole!" he growled. "How much longer must I stay in it?"

CHAPTER VII

“THERE WAS A SOUND OF REVELRY BY NIGHT”

NEW Year's Eve found Tchisinsky still at the “Yellow Castle”; he did not wish to leave without trying his fate, and the arbiter thereof was absent. Marusia's hand he could have for the asking, he felt assured, but he wished to feel equally sure of the contents of the said hand. Even the combined influence of moonlight, snow, and a *tête-à-tête* with the ady of his choice had not effected any definite result. When questioned afterwards in the reassembled council, Marusia confessed that André Andréévich had at first silently wiped the frost from his moustache, and only after a prolonged silence had asked her if she knew the cause of his stay in Bielovka.

“What did you answer?” demanded Mária Alexandrovna, eagerly.

“I told him that I supposed he wished to pass New Year's Day with us and see papa.”

“Well?” questioned Mária Alexandrovna, with increased eagerness, while Seraphima Profirovna took her cigarette from her mouth and gazed at her grandniece with awakened curiosity.

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“He said that I was partly right,” went on Marusia, “and then he was silent again, and presently went on: ‘And do you know why I came?’ and as I did not answer at once, he said, ‘For—you.’”

“O—ho!” exclaimed Seraphima Profirovna, coming to a standstill in her usual restless tramp up and down the room. “Now, is that to be counted as a proposal or not?”

“It was most certainly a declaration,” affirmed Maria Alexandrovna.

“If it counts as a proposal,” went on the old lady, “he might have made it in better style. I had a friend when I was young—she was a Rim-skaia, and her sister married a Prince Gourkine, who treated her shamefully and carried on with her maid; she was n’t at all bad-looking when she was about twenty, but she lost her looks very quickly, and a student proposed to her, which was great impudence, for he was quite poor and her brother’s tutor for the summer; he was in the Corps de Pages——”

“How could a student be in the Corps de Pages?” asked Maria Alexandrovna, irritably; “and please, aunt, don’t——”

“And did I say he was?” inquired Seraphima Profirovna, calmly taking up the tangled threads of her narrative. “Well, when he proposed it was great impudence, as I said before, but very pretty. He said: ‘Anna Ivanovna, when a man

begins to understand the meaning of life he knows that the highest happiness consists in having a lifelong, loving, and loved friend, who will share his hopes, strengthen him in his despondency, love him in youth and age, in joy and sorrow, receiving the same from him in addition to a tender and protective care. For this ideal friend must needs be a woman, as man is too coarse to satisfy man in his deeper moods; and this friend—when joining to her other qualities womanly fascination—makes the perfect wife. I have dreamed of such a friend—of such a wife. My dreams are fulfilled in—you. Dare I hope to find my wife in—you?’ ”

Seraphima Profirovna recited this speech in the sing-song of a National School child repeating the Multiplication Table. She said the last sentence over again, lingering on its beauties. “Now, that’s what I call a proposal! André Andréévich does n’t waste words. Nevertheless, she refused him.”

“Who?” demanded Mària Alexandrovna, perplexedly; “really, aunt——”

But Seraphima Profirovna resumed her walk and her cigarette, and her niece, turning to the council, tried, with its help, to decide whether or no André Andréévich had committed himself.

“It was certainly a declaration of—interest,” was Minnie’s expressed opinion, but the humour of the situation was losing its spice, and she was

bored and disgusted in only a slighter degree than Lydia herself.

But happily a side issue soon occupied all Maria Alexandrovna's attention—that of giving a Costume dance on New Year's Eve. True, there was a dearth of young men; André Andréévich, Max and Korsakoff being the only three whom Madame Gortchnikova considered worthy to be her guests; but, driven by necessity, she graciously extended her favour to Nico Ostrougoff, even asking him to bring a couple of his friends—officers garrisoned in the district town; then the Justice of the Peace had a student-son home from Moscow; and the priest was equally fortunate and inordinately proud of his brilliant son; Maria Alexandrovna consoled herself for the humble standing of the latter by reflections upon the respectability of the student uniform.

“And as to young Ostrougoff,” she declared, “he is really quite a favourite at the town balls, dances divinely, and is undoubtedly very handsome.”

“I don't see why you should think yourself better than young Ostrougoff,” grunted Seraphima Profirovna. “He is a *dvorianine*.”

In the old lady's eyes that magic word covered a multitude of sins.

“My dear aunt, it is not enough to be a *dvorianine* in these days. One must be educated and serve the Government, or be nobody. Ostrougoff has no education.”

“And that’s not much loss, either,” asserted Seraphima Profirovna, touchily. She herself could barely read and could not write, but considered herself superior to all “the intelligence” put together.

Marusia, excited by the prospect of amusement and the discreet attentions of André Andréevich, brightened up wonderfully, but Lydia’s pale and serious face looked colder than ever in the midst of the holiday bustle.

“You are interested in nothing,” her mother declared to her, pettishly, when Lydia declined to discuss the question of her costume for the fiftieth time.

“I have already said a dozen times that I like the Turkish costume, but I am tired of the subject. I rather like dancing, but in this case——”

She stopped abruptly. “Well?” demanded her mother. “Go on. I hate these mysterious hints. Speak out.”

“I was only thinking that perhaps papa may return, and he will not be pleased to find the house full of visitors.”

“And why not, pray? Is hospitality a crime? Is rational amusement at this festive season criminal?”

“Of course not. But you know you always make it appear so yourself. You always tell papa we never receive in his absence, and he knows very well it is not true. It is that which makes him the

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most angry, I am sure. You will forbid every one to speak of this dance in his presence, and if a visitor comes you will tremble all the time lest he should mention it. Well, never mind, mamma. Don't be angry—” Lydia changed her tone of remonstrance to that of coaxing as she saw signs of a storm. “Do as you like; of course, it is n't my place to dictate to you. But why have you given such a hideous costume to Mademoiselle? She will not venture out of a corner the whole evening.”

This was exactly why Madame Gortchnikova had given the calico costume of “Pierrot” to Claire.

Minnie had obstinately refused to masquerade in masculine attire in spite of Madame Gortchnikova's assertions that the dance was to be quite informal and the costumes only to be put on for a time for the sake of a little fun and mystification.

“But you English are so prudish!” she exclaimed, pettishly.

“I'm not a prude, but I don't want to make myself a spectacle.”

“Then you are vain and coquettish.”

“Perhaps,” said Minnie, calmly.

“Then choose this costume,” said Madame Gortchnikova, controlling herself with difficulty, and indicating a picture of a Flower-girl, cut from an old magazine. The “costume” consisted of a red skirt and a blouse so wanting in collar and sleeves as to suggest a chemise.

"Don't you think it a little too—*décolleté*?" suggested Minnie, sweetly. "However, I can wear a modification of it which I can arrange myself."

"Miss would look nice as 'Marguerite,' with her pretty hair in two long plaits," suggested Lydia, disregarding her mother's frown.

"The Flower-girl is best," said Maria Alexandrovna. "Miss, remember a Flower-girl must not be *bien coiffée*."

"I will follow the picture as nearly as possible," said Minnie; and Madame Gortchnikova was satisfied, as she felt sure that the "thin little match," as Seraphima Profirovna called Minnie, would not look well in a blouse without a collar, and with untidy hair.

"Why did you suggest 'Marguerite'?" she demanded of Lydia when they were alone. "Are you so silly as to wish her to put you in the shade?"

"Mamma!" was all Lydia said in reply.

In spite of her expressed opinion as to the character of the entertainment, Madame Gortchnikova had chosen really beautiful costumes for her daughters; Stepanida's deft fingers arranging a Turkish costume for Lydia from the softest silks and gauzes, while to Marusia was assigned the famous Pompadour, so as to admit of powdering her grey-streaked hair.

The evening's festivities began with the inevitable *zakouska*, followed by a religious service. The spacious and lofty room in the tower, where

the ogre had crashed out the *Moonlight Sonata* on the dilapidated piano, had been freshened by much scrubbing on the part of Pasha and Akulina, intermixed with the latter's picturesque grumblings. Plants and seats were dragged from all parts of the house and placed along the walls, and it made a very passable ballroom in spite of its want of finish. The musicians' gallery was empty, of course, but a tuner had spent the whole day upon the piano, succeeding at last in getting it into something approaching order.

The priest, followed by the deacon, advanced to the table placed below the Holy Image and bearing three candlesticks, a silver basin with holy water, and a long silver-handled brush with which to sprinkle it. The priest walked unsteadily, for he had drunk many glasses of *vodka* that day with his parishioners, and the good man could never stand much strong drink. The deacon, a gigantic, red-bearded young man, with thick hair falling into his eyes and curling over his shoulders, was in the same state; but the service ended without any greater scandal than the dropping of the missal, many lapses of memory, an occasional hiccough, and the unsteady sprinkling of the holy water.

Just inside the door was a group of servants, and close by twelve old women from an almshouse on the estate. They all crossed and prostrated themselves with much devotion during the

service, and when the priest, after blessing "the gentry," advanced towards them, they came forward one by one, craving his blessing and kissing his hand.

"Well, old girls," chuckled the priest. "So you've come to gobble at Gortchnikoff's!"

"We gobble, *batoushka*, we gobble," chorused the ancient ladies.

"Gobble away, old girls, while they let you," was the parting advice of their spiritual guide.

Downstairs in the dining-room a table sparkling with crystal and silver was laid out with *zakouska*, while in the hall an equally piquant but less daintily served repast was prepared for the "gobbling" of the servants and almshouse women.

After the service, the priest, the deacon, and the piano-tuner returned to the *zakouska*, and the old women to their "gobbling," while the girls began to dress, and the young men were shown into a room in the tower where a great chest containing masks and odds and ends of costumes was placed at their disposal.

Nico Ostrougoff was in his element; he turned over the heap of bright-coloured silks, muslins, furs, and tinsel, and ruffled up his golden hair as if trying thereby to aid his inventive faculties, choosing and advising, laughing and swearing, all in a breath.

"Max Ardilionovich,"—even when Max was ceremoniously addressed as the son of his father,

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no one gave him his full name,—“may the thunder smash me to bits if this won't suit you.”

“Like a saddle a cow,” was Max's retort as he seized upon the boyarin's caftan in question and held it up between his finger and thumb. “Petrusha, it will do for you perhaps.”

“But there does n't seem to be the proper—what do you call them?—leggings,” objected Korsakoff, “and I can't put a boyarin's caftan over a pair of modern trousers.”

“An interesting linking of past and present, Petrusha.”

Nico, with a mocking gleam in his blue eyes, began to sing a Little Russian ballad.

Biela sobi Marusia
Poloobiela Petrusa.
Oi, likho ne Petruss,
Bielie litchko, chawnie uss!

Which means, in plain English, that Marusia fell in love with Petrusha for his white face and his black moustache.

“Oi, Petruss, here 's something for you.” Nico tossed a yellow robe embroidered with cabalistic signs to Korsakoff. “Astronomical, or something of that sort, is n't it?”

“Our costumes are not to be signs of our profession, but disguises, clever-head,” said the assistant-professor, with the calm loftiness of a scientist.

Then up and spoke the priest's son, a modest-looking student.

"I'm going to put on this rag and this mask, and I bet my head that none of the ladies will know me till I unmask." And straightway he attired himself in a long night-robe of rose-coloured batiste, which came down to his feet and trailed slightly at the back, belted it round his broad waist with a white ribbon, put on the mask of a fat-faced old woman, and, making a curtsey to Ostrougoff, offered him his services as cook, in a squeaky flow of inimitable Little Russian.

Nico sent him to a warm place, and the travestied student pretended to be heart-broken at the refusal of so handsome a master, and with a parting "God give you health, *panitch*," took off his mask and sat down in his rose-coloured draperies on the edge of the chest to watch the robing of his companions.

Meanwhile in the girls' room the dressing had been carried on in all seriousness. Minnie, coming from her home across the park,—she had absolutely refused to go back to be baked in her old quarters,—could scarcely believe the pretty Pompadour she met in the hall to be Marusia.

Madame Gortchnikova was so pleased with Minnie for her genuine admiration of her elder daughter that she forbore to make remarks upon Minnie's tasteful arrangement of the Flower-girl's

costume. The collarless, almost transparent white blouse was quite modest and unpretentious, but revealed round, soft arms bare to the elbow, gave a hint of a dimpled shoulder and a smooth and delicately tinted neck, while the short skirt revealed the prettiest feet and ankles in the world; a rare beauty in Russia, where the women, though often otherwise finely moulded, are nearly always clumsy about the feet. As a finishing touch, hair not *bien coiffée* suited her.

“Hum!” said a voice behind her, and Minnie turned to confront Seraphima Profirovna, who, in a black silk dress as curtailed as her ordinary robes, and a lace cap on one side of her head, was regarding the girl with comical astonishment. “You are not so thin, after all. Good enough shoulders. By heaven, good enough!”

Claire Rousselle, in the shapeless garb of a Pierrot and a hideous mask, was leaning against the unfinished balustrade. In obedience to Madame Gortchnikova, Minnie put on an equally hideous mask, and, laughing through its grinning mouth, went up-stairs with the others. Neither Lydia nor Marusia nor “the duchess’s daughters” wore masks, though, as Maria Alexandrovna afterwards said, it would have been better for Julietta and Leonora if they had done so. Vera, being a married lady, wore an ordinary evening dress. Floria made a delicious fairy; Fräulein, a homely Swiss peasant.

When the costumed girls entered the great room upstairs, they were met by a grotesque group of young men, among whom it was difficult to recognise any one. Nico had donned the boyarin's caftan himself, substituting his riding-boots for the leggings, but the mask of a caricatured old maid, which he had fastened on with a shawl, was scarcely the finishing touch required. Max wore the magician's robe and the mask of a crimson-nosed peasant. André Andréévich had decided "not to make a fool of himself," but the two garrison officers were wonderfully got up, one as a Polish Jew, complete even to the ringlets and the accent, which he imitated to perfection; the other as a bride, in a stained white satin skirt, a bodice eked out with a shawl, a musty veil, wreath, and bouquet, and a startlingly hideous spectacled mask. But the most inimitable of all was an old lady in a black silk dress,—also eked out with a shawl over the shoulders,—and lace cap tied under the chin, and a mask of respectable and cheerful old age. No one guessed who it was, and the way in which *she* strode across the room provoked shrieks of laughter, while her modest and squeaky refusals to dance on account of her advanced years were no less comical than the mincing stride with which she pranced through a mazurka with the boyarin.

Minnie took off her mask and sat down to the piano, Madame Gortchnikova having decided that

she should play for the dancers. Seraphima Profirovna stood well out of the way, smoking as usual; the servants crowded outside in the corridor, every one seemed very merry; even Lydia relaxed and laughed heartily at the majestic friskings of the tall old lady, the mercantile conversation of the Polish Jew, and the officious cook who declared *her* ability to make Little Russian *borsch* out of an old shoe. Only Mademoiselle, having torn off her mask, sat in a corner and felt uncomfortable.

Nico Ostrougoff, who had been recognised and had removed his shawl and mask, came up to her, and, bending his golden head asked, with the gentleness of a young bear, why she sat there moping.

“How can I go about in this rag?” asked Claire, in her soft, lisping Russian.

“Can’t say it suits you. You look queer. Why did you put it on?”

“Mària Alexandrovna chose it for me.”

“Are you forced to accept her taste?”

“Oh, anything for peace,” said Claire, wearily.

“Look here—you’re a little fool—I’ve told you so before,” said Nico, roughly; but the word *dourinda* is more than half caressing. “Snap your fingers at her and her *chudak* and leave this ‘Yellow Castle.’ Why should you be her slave?”

“Because I don’t quite see that it would be any better to be your mistress.”

“*Dourinda!*” he repeated. “Of course it would

be better. You would command me and my house."

The words were humble, but the tone was masterful. His bright blue eyes sought her soft brown ones hardily. He was smiling beneath his tawny moustache. Claire's curling lashes trembled and lifted. Something of the love of life, the arrogant gaiety of the splendid young face bending over her flashed into hers. She felt as if suddenly flooded with sunshine. Her lips parted in a faint answering smile.

But at that moment Mária Alexandrovna, remarking that her best dancer was devoting himself to Mademoiselle, in spite of her hideous costume, moved across the room towards the two.

"Go away, Nico," said Claire, softly. "Mária Alexandrovna is coming."

"Let her come!" retorted Nico, and stood his ground till his hostess approached and asked why he was not dancing.

"I am trying to induce Mademoiselle to favour me."

"Oh, she is very obstinate, Nicolas Ivanovich; it's no good your trying to persuade her against her will."

"Is that true?" Nico asked Claire, in a low voice.

For a moment the impulse seized her to deny it, to dance with him, to flirt, and show her power

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over him before the woman who was continually reminding her of her dependent position, sapping her powers of resistance hour by hour. Her face glowed, then her eyes fell on the shapeless white sacks enclosing her shapely limbs, and she said, shortly:

“Perhaps—” then lower—“Go away, Nico.”

Nico went.

Mària Alexandrovna was in the best of all possible moods. One of her daughters was looking really lovely, and the other, aided by costume and powder, was more than presentable. André Andréévich saw it and was glad. There was no need to be ashamed of such a wife after all. Evidently excitement had a wonderfully favourable effect upon her nervous system, and if such a very mild dose could work such wonders, what would not the brimming cup of court pleasures do for her? He devoted himself to her exclusively, and scarcely danced with any one else, thus causing the mother's heart to sing for joy.

Only Nico Ostrougoff had been recognised. Curiosity was rife as to the other masks, and especially the elephantinely frisky old lady, and no one dreamt of connecting her with the shy and retiring Korsakoff.

Minnie was getting all the sound she could out of the cracked piano as she crashed through a mazurka, when there was a commotion among the servants crowding round the door, and drawing

back hurriedly they made way for Vladimir Vladimirovich.

He was dressed in an unpretentious suit of dark blue and the inevitable high boots, and stood grimly watching the dancers for a minute or two before they saw him. He had driven over from the district town, having taken the first train that went thither from the government town where he had arrived in the small hours of the previous morning. Mária Alexandrovna had never dreamt of expecting him by any but an express train, but the ogre had been seized with a desire to spend New Year's Day in the bosom of his family, not unmixed, it must be confessed, with curiosity as to how they were spending it without him.

Mária Alexandrovna had addressed a letter to him to the Lyceum, in which she had expressed herself more in sorrow than in anger, saying that she would pass a most melancholy Christmas and New Year, and that she could not understand how he could have been so cruel as to condemn her and her children to pass this universally festive season in loneliness and heart-breaking misery. Standing there by the door viewing this scene "of revelry by night," Vladimir Vladimirovich recalled these touching words, and smiled grimly as he saw his wife surrounded by her grotesque guests.

Suddenly she turned and saw him. For a second her face expressed the utmost consterna-

tion, then, recovering herself, she clasped her hands as if in joy, ran the length of the room and flung herself into his unresponsive arms.

“How glad I am, Voloda! What a pity you have just missed the midnight service! But we shall spend New Year’s Day together, at least. Oh, how glad I am!”

“Naturally so. My arrival has drawn you from such heart-breaking misery and loneliness, has n’t it?” demanded the ogre in a voice which made his wife dread one of his uncontrollable fits of rage. “What are all these fools doing here?” he continued, not deigning to lower his voice, which happily, the music drowned. Minnie had seen nothing of what was going on and, deafened by her own music, did not remark the cessation of the dance.

“Remember the duties of hospitality,” urged Mária Alexandrovna in agonised appeal.

“Remember you owe me wifely duty. I have more than once said that that young Ostrougoff should not enter my doors. He cheated me about a horse, the rogue!”

“For the very Creator’s sake, Voloda, be calm. They will go in a few hours. I was so miserable that I snatched at any distraction to drown unhappy thoughts. It was the duchess’s suggestion. She wished to give the dance at her son’s place, but they have no room large enough. I was so miserable. Why did you leave me, Vladimir?”

This was carrying war into the enemy's camp with a vengeance, and the ogre's eyes blazed. But at that moment Minnie, becoming aware of something strange, looked over her shoulder and, seeing no one dancing, left off playing. Vladimir Vladimirovich looked at the group of his silent and expectant guests, and, though he had not invited them, the instinct of hospitality, nowhere stronger than in Russia, rose up and restrained his rage for the time.

Most of the young men had snatched off their masks, but the old lady's was complicated with cap, false ringlets, and strings, so that she—or rather he—stood swearing softly and tugging frantically at his head-dress.

Vladimir Vladimirovich approached his unbidden guests. "The compliments of the season, *ghospoda*," he said. "Duchess, my purest respects. André Andréévich, welcome. Nicolas Ivanovich, how goes it? Max Ardilionovich, how are you? Ah, Vania,"—this to the priest's son—"my congratulations on your success. The gold medal, I hear; *Molodetz*."

The garrison officers, who had taken off their masks, were introduced, and both bowed with irreproachable grace and a clinking of spurs beneath Jewish caftan and bride's skirt. "And whom—" went on the ogre, staring at the figure of an old lady tearing her hair—"whom have I the honour to salute?"

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Max burst out laughing. “It’s Korsakoff, Vladimir Vladimirovich,” he said.

“*Privat-dosent*,* my salutations.”

Korsakoff still tore at his head-dress. “The confounded thing *won’t* come off,” he said, in despair. But suddenly the whole structure slipped to the ground, and the pale, thoughtful face in its setting of dark hair and beard appeared above the black silk dress.

——“Oi Petruss,
Bielie litchko chawnie uss!”

hummed Nico.

There was a general laugh, in which the ogre joined noisily. “Aha, scientist!” he roared.

* Assistant-Professor.

CHAPTER VIII

LOVE AND WINE

THE visitors did not leave so soon after all. Vladimir Vladimirovich, always in extremes, became as eager for their company as he had been for their departure. He took the elders down to the dining-room, where they found the priest, the deacon, and the tuner still hovering round the *zakouska*. Gortchnikoff called Efime from his post of observation, sent him to the cellar for more wine and to the larder for more provisions, and sat down to a real Russian feast. The tuner tried to slip quietly away, but the ogre, with rough good-nature, pushed him into a chair. The priest and the deacon had already drunk much more than was good for them, but their host would not hear of their departure. He filled their glasses with champagne, which was stronger than his arguments, and, sipping at the sparkling nectar, they became self-confident and unrestrained, and each man gave vent to his inmost thoughts, caring little whether his neighbour listened to him or not. Upstairs in one of the tower rooms the young people, with the duchess and

Mària Alexandrovna, supped more modestly, but as the dancing recommenced Efime appeared with an invitation from Vladimir Vladimirovich for André Andréévich and the other officers and any other gentleman who wished, to join the party downstairs. The priest's son went in order to be near his father whose weakness he knew, the three especially invited were obliged to go, but the others continued dancing for a while, and then broke up into groups. Mària Alexandrovna was gossiping with the duchess in her boudoir downstairs, Seraphima Profirovna had long been wrapped in the arms of Morpheus, Fräulein was busy about household matters, Mademoiselle was with Nico Ostrougoff, and Minnie was talking to Max, so that for once Lydia and Marusia were without a "body-guard." The duchess's daughters—with the exception of Floria, who was taking a Russian lesson from the son of the Justice of the Peace—were downstairs with their mother and hostess, and Vèra tried to draw out Marusia, who was beginning to be cross and sleepy.

When a party of young people breaks up into pairs, the subsequent conversation is generally supposed to be of an amorous or at least a sentimental character, especially when the pairs seek sequestered nooks and deserted corridors. Max and Minnie were in the musician's gallery, leaning against the unfinished balustrade.

Said Minnie to Max: "Why do they call Mr.

Korsakoff 'private dissent'? Dost thou know what that is to tell in English?"

Max confessed his ignorance.

"It means," Minnie explained laboriously, "it means that you don't agree with somebody, only you don't say so. Private dissent—not public contradiction. It makes me think that Mr. Korsakoff privately contradicts everything his chief says. It's a good thing he does n't do it publicly."

"But, you ridiculous child," laughed Max, "it is n't *private dissent* at all, but *privatt do-sent*—assistant-professor."

"Of which?" asked Minnie. Max understood the question, being used to her Russian by this time.

"Of meteorology."

"Oh, the clerk of the weather," laughed Minnie, in English, and, trying to translate the joke, got cross and gave it up.

"I tell you what," said Max, "you really ought to learn Russian seriously. It may be a very good thing for you later on if you get tired of being a governess——"

"I'm tired of it already," admitted Minnie. "I came out to Russia six years ago with my brother——"

A shadow fell across her face, she checked herself, and then went on in her usual tone of voice: "I was always very fortunate in getting nice

places; in fact I was always with the same family until my pupil married, except for an occasional summer engagement in the Crimea for a change. But now I begin to understand that I was exceptionally happy, and that it is not an enviable position—that of governess.”

“Is Mária Alexandrovna very nasty to you?” asked Max, quickly.

“I have nothing to say against her personally. Still I observe, and not in vain. Yes, you are right. I must learn Russian seriously, and then see if I can’t get translations. But——”

Here she broke off again, for she did not wish to tell him that she was obliged to stay at the “Yellow Castle” till she had saved sufficient money to enable her to wait if translations did not pay at first.

While this very practical conversation was being carried on between this unsentimental pair, Lydia and Korsakoff were having their first *tête-à-tête*. He felt strongly drawn to her. There was a strange blending of *naïveté* and disillusion, ignorance and self-culture, narrowness and breadth, enthusiasm and calm judgment about this daughter of the steppe who pined for moral air as fresh and free as that of her native plains. A superb self-reliance was perhaps her strongest trait, a self-reliance only equalled by her ignorance of the world which was perhaps only the more profound on account of a certain superficial knowledge of life which she imagined to be complete. She was

as yet too young to be anything but intensely serious, for gaiety is often—especially in women—an outward sign of inward indifference. Joy and sorrow have been balanced, and such trifles cause the rising or falling of the scales that it is not worth while troubling about it. A profound Stoic is sometimes superficially an Epicurean.

But Lydia had put nothing herself into the the scales of life as yet, and did not know how light is every individual joy and sorrow, too light to affect balance save when blended with the common mass of universal emotion. She longed to live her own life, whether for herself or others she could not say. She was like a young bird beating its wings in impatience to quit the nest, but leaving the direction of its flight to be decided at the moment when it hovers above the whole wide world.

And as Petrusha talked to her he understood all this, and knew she was not a woman destined to do a great work in the world, but only a lovable, high-spirited girl longing to escape from a wearying life of petty troubles.

“I had an idea she was socialistic,” he thought, “but I was wrong. She scarcely understands the word. She is very ignorant.”

And then he thought how interesting it would be to mould that young intelligence, to fill her life with interest, to teach the proud young face to smile and soften.

"I did not imagine you had such a talent for mimicry," she said, by way of opening the conversation. Her tone was scarcely complimentary.

"No? I suppose you consider the discovered talent far from creditable."

"I did not say so."

"Lydia Vladimirovna," he asserted, "believe me, only a fool thinks he must always seem serious; or, to put it better, it takes a wise man to play the fool."

"Pardon me, Peter Petrovich, but that sounds as if you are calling yourself a wise man."

"I don't consider myself a fool," admitted Petrusha, modestly.

By degrees the conversation took a more serious turn. Petrusha could not have been accused of flirting, but he tried to find out and influence the half-formed opinions of the girl who attracted him, which is a sign of far deeper interest than that evinced by pretty speeches.

He was one of those men—far more numerous than French novelists and women themselves imagine—to whom the "eternal feminine" is a matter of slight consideration. Love, in its usual form, was for him a thing widely apart from his life; but as he found himself more and more attracted towards Lydia, the realisation of what love may be came to him with that apparent suddenness and ease with which difficult problems are often solved.

Meanwhile Claire had changed her Pierrot costume for a pretty grey dress, and was standing in one of the tower corridors listening to Nico's by no means eloquent love-making.

That such men as young Ostrouloff should be attracted by such women as Claire is not surprising; it may be simply the same feeling which prompts the same men as boys to pursue and grasp a butterfly; and that such women as Claire frequently love men of the Ostrouloff type is only to be accounted for by the theory of the force of contrasts or the law of contraries, which seems so often to rule the world.

She was so silent and still that Nico lost patience, caught her by the shoulders, and drew her close to him. "This has been dragging on for more than a year,—ever since I came here about that wretched horse. How was I to know it would go lame? I never dangled about after any woman so long before, *ey Boga!*—wasted the whole of last month in town just to see you in the street sometimes when Gortchnikova sent you out shopping. I'm tired of waiting. Come and live with me at my place. It's better than the 'Yellow Castle,' I should think. That's almost as good as marriage, by Heaven it is! What are you afraid of? You are quite free. I'm lonely up there, lonely without you, *ey Boga!* I dream about you——"

He went on in the same strain with many re-

petitions of his favourite oath, and, breaking off suddenly, bent his curly head and kissed her. It was not their first kiss, but never had Claire's senses reeled as they did then. Her head sunk dizzily against his shoulder; he held her closer still, and laughed softly.

Not long afterwards he entered the dining-room to take leave of his host. The priest's son was endeavouring to get his father away, and the old man was weeping and murmuring maudlin complaints against ungrateful children. "Gave him the highest education—gold medal—great sacrifice—mocking my grey hairs," he hiccoughed.

The deacon—his freckled face shining—was drinking his fifth glass of champagne. Over the first he had waxed pathetic, referring to his wife and child at home; over the second he had delivered a warning against envy, to which his neighbour, the tuner, paid not the slightest attention; the third made him merry, the fourth quarrelsome, and the fifth belligerent. At the upper end of the long table sat Vladimir Vladimirovich, the Justice of the Peace, and the three defenders of the Fatherland. The tuner was hopelessly maudlin. He had never tasted champagne in his life before, and the sight of it being poured out like water, together with the honour of sitting at Gortchnikoff's table, was altogether too much for him. He wept copiously, and wearied the deacon with entreaties for his blessing.

"Father deacon, your blessing," he implored for the twentieth time, as the deacon swallowed the dregs of his fifth glass.

"Bother me not, thou fool!" growled the deacon. "I've had enough of blessings!"

"Father deacon, your blessing," repeated the tuner, tearfully, rising unsteadily from his seat and bending before the deacon.

"Ah—thou son of a devil! Well—take thy blessing!"

He lifted his great, red hand, and gave the petitioner such a blow on the face that he fell in a heap against his chair, where, murmuring, "Father deacon, your blessing," he straightway went to sleep with his head on the seat.

Nico, entering at this moment, clapped his hand upon the deacon's broad shoulder. "A heavy blessing, father deacon," he laughed. "*Molodetz!*"

"Take thy hand from my shoulder, thou son of Cain!" growled the deacon.

Nico laughed again, and approached Vladimir Vladimirovich, who at sight of him called out "Aha, Balder the Beautiful! Skaal!"

But the "northern god" was not to be induced to remain in Valhalla. He resisted all Vladimir Vladimirovich's entreaties, and passed out into the hall, and from thence to his sledge, which was waiting outside.

"Nico has entered the path of virtue," laughed

Gortchnikoff, as his young guest departed. "*Ghospoda*, here 's to his continuance therein."

When Ostrougoff's sledge reached the first turning in the park he bade the coachman pull up, and, turning round in his seat, he scanned the path which led to the back of the house. After several minutes' waiting in the intense cold while the impatient horses pawed the snow, Nico swore roundly, leapt from the sledge, and walked resolutely towards the back of the house, framing excuses for asking to see Mademoiselle as he walked; but before he had gone far the door opened and closed hurriedly, and a cloaked and hooded figure came towards him. He hurried forward and caught it in his arms.

"Claire! At last!" he said triumphantly, bending his head for a kiss.

"Are you mad?" cried a clear, indignant voice, and two small hands pushed him back with the strength of anger.

Nico laughed confusedly. "I beg your pardon, Miss," he said, recognising Minnie's voice. "I did n't remark you particularly; that is, I mean I took you for some one else."

"Well, I am myself," asserted Minnie, with dignity, "and so please let me pass."

Nico was only too glad to do so, and as Minnie passed on the door opened again, and a second cloaked and hooded figure appeared, carrying a travelling bag.

"Is it thou?" he took the precaution to ask this time.

"It is I," whispered Claire. "I could not get away before; Fräulein kept me. I thought I should never escape from her. I told her I was going across the park to the English girl's. I'm sure she did n't believe me."

"What does it matter?" laughed Nico. "You are mine now."

He lifted her easily in his arms and strode towards the waiting sledge.

Minnie heard voices, and, turning, saw them getting into the sledge. She could not recognise Claire in the ghostly darkness, but she remembered Nico's exclamation, and understood. She ran forward impulsively. "Claire!" she called.

The girl leaned from the sledge, though Nico's arms still held her.

"*Je ne peux plus,*" she cried as the horses dashed past Minnie, driving the snow into her face.

CHAPTER IX

COSSACK

“Dăité, dăité mnya svobodu,
Dăité mnya siyania dnyé!
Chawnie-broviyu dievietsu—
Chawnie-grievinu konyé!”

“Give, oh give me freedom!
Give me brilliant days!
A black-browed girl,
A black-maned steed.”—*Cossack Ballad.*

IT was only by pleading the necessity of going home with the duchess and her daughters that Max and Korsakoff eluded the now hospitably minded ogre's pressing invitation to stay and finish the night—or rather the morning—out. At length, having invited them to dinner,—an invitation both had their reasons for accepting,—their host let them depart, and they left him sitting grimly jubilant at the head of his table, contemplating the maudlin priest, the belligerent deacon, the snoring tuner, the expansive Justice, and the three excited officers.

The party broke up at seven o'clock in the morning. Nico's friends were obliged to be in

barracks by twelve, and after an early lunch André Andréévich drove to town with them, on his return calling at the duchess's to pay the customary New Year's visit, and coming back to the Yellow Castle with Max and Petrusha.

Minnie, who was "on duty" with Lydia, saw them coming up the drive, and began to sing, mischievously:

“ ‘ There came three dukes a-riding.’

They 're a-driving, really, but that 's a mere detail.”

“ Why do you call them ‘ dukes’ ?” asked Lydia. She was rather literal, at least as regards English, and could not understand half Minnie said.

“ One is a duchess's son, and the others may be ennobled for the sake of company and the appositeness of my ballad.”

All day long conversation had lagged between the two. There was only one subject in their minds, and that they did not mention. On reading Mademoiselle's farewell letter, which was no more than a statement of her new address, Madame Gortchnikova had made a terrible scene before her daughters, bestowing upon the French girl several of the most unflattering adjectives in the Russian language, which is extremely vigorous and picturesque.

“ What do you think about it ?” Lydia had asked Minnie, and there was a hurt, puzzled ex-

pression in her sapphire eyes. "I know Claire is not bad."

"Don't ask me," said Minnie, "because I sha'n't tell you what I think; I shall merely repeat a few sentences regarding the beauty of virtue and the hideousness of vice à l'*Ollendorf*, if you persist. Your mother has often told me that I am not to speak to you upon the subjects of religion, politics, morality, or social questions."

"Then what are we to speak of, pray?"

"There is always the exhaustive subject of dress and each other's looks, to say nothing of your favourite topic, strawberry jam, with its variant—pork-pies."

"Miss, I believe you have no heart; you are always joking."

"My motto is 'Grin and bear it.' Grinning is n't such a bad way of getting through this vale of tears."

At dinner Vladimir Vladimirovich was in the worst of tempers: even the hospitable instinct was not strong enough to enable him to hide the fact. Although, as he boasted, he never lost his head, he often made it ache, and a drinking-bout was frequently followed by a fit of rage. All his lulled resentment against his wife sprang up more clamorous than ever, added to a chafing sense of his own occasional dependence on the Society he affected to despise. And a man is never so cross with every one in general as when he is angry with himself.

Max, who had known the ogre for years, understood his mood well enough, and resolved upon as hasty a retreat as politeness allowed; but when, at the close of dinner, Mária Alexandrovna rose from the table, Vladimir Vladimirovich called upon the young men to sit down and be sociable over another bottle, which is not so invariable a custom as it is in England.

André Andréévich was as yellow as a guinea, with violet bags under his eyes, and the ogre himself was several shades sallower than usual; but Max and Petrusha looked irritatingly fresh after a short morning's sleep and a long afternoon's ride.

The ogre's temper visibly improved as the champagne glasses were emptied; he refilled them himself, having sent Efime to—well—not the cellar. He began to indulge in his low, dry chuckle, to tell anecdotes, and to tilt mockingly against the world in general.

“The priest was as drunk as a shoemaker last night.” (In Russia a shoemaker sets the standard of drunkenness instead of a lord.) “Vania had to get Efime to help carry him to the sledge. Aha!—he won't have the face to preach against *vodka* to the peasants again; but that's been put a stop to already. You know he began a crusade against strong drink, setting the example of abstinence himself,—he has a terribly weak head, poor old man,—well, he received a hint from his

bishop not to 'compromise the interests of the government,' and had to leave off."

"What a pity!" exclaimed Max.

"What, Max Ardilionovich!—are you an enemy of the government? How can you think it right to attack its richest monopoly?"

"I admit that in some respects it's a good thing that *vodka* is a government monopoly. The people are not poisoned with concoctions of methylated spirit, at least. But I don't see why drunkenness should be encouraged as profitable to the exchequer."

"Oho! A bit of a Socialist, are you? That comes of spending four years at the University. There's nothing of that sort at the Lyceum, thank heaven! There was once a slight tendency that way in my time, but it was soon crushed, and the instigator ended his career in the Petropaulov'sky. At least I know he was sent there, and never heard of his release. A pity! He was a fine fellow enough, and of a good old family. All the more shame to him for taking up ideas unworthy of a *dvorianine*."

"Excuse me, Vladimir Vladimirovich," said Max, somewhat hotly—the wine was pricking through his veins and banishing caution,—“I don't see why you should consider broad and progressive ideas as 'unworthy a *dvorianine*.'”

"Rebels have always been the dregs of Society, vagabonds, idlers, jealous of other men's riches

and the rank that is acquired by good service to the State. A *dvorianine* must be loyal to the Tsar, above all, a patriot——”

“The two are not always compatible,” struck in Petrusha. “Besides, what’s the good of dragging the Tsar into it? No one has anything against him personally.”

“Oho!” gasped the ogre, “so you have an eye on the affairs of this planet, after all, have you? How condescending you are to His Majesty! But I tell you——” he thumped vigorously upon the table——“that rebels always were and always will be vagabonds and *canaille*.”

“What of the Decembrists?” demanded Max.

The ogre banged his fist upon the table again, and, being unable to answer such a direct challenge, shifted the attack to Petrusha.

“And you, Korsakoff,” he said. “You whose ancestors supported the throne seven hundred years ago, how——”

“My ancestors?” laughed Korsakoff. “They were so busy supporting themselves at the expense of Pole and Tartar that I don’t think they thought much about the throne——unless it was their Hetman’s.”

“What are you talking about?” demanded Vladimir Vladimirovich. “The Rimski-Korsakoffs came over from Corsica in the year——”

“But I’m not a Rimski, and do not even belong to a branch of that family. Names are mis-

leading sometimes. Why, there's a shoemaker in town, who does n't claim kinship with the Tsar because his name happens to be Romanoff. I don't know why we are called 'Korsakoff,'— 'Cossackoff' would be nearer the truth."

"What?" gasped Gortchnikoff. "Are you a Cossack?"

"Donskoï. Did n't you know? We are proverbially proud of our race. I——"

"You are not a *dvorianine*?" demanded Gortchnikoff. His voice was ominous.

"Don't you know that Cossacks have no distinctions but those of military rank? If one of us enters the civil service he gains the civil grades, serving only one year in the army like every other University man. But as a rule we stick to the old profession, and outside military rank are all 'Cossacks,' born equal."

"And your father served to the rank of——?"

"To no rank at all. He is quite uneducated, and foolish enough to consider that 'Donskoï Cossack' is a proud title in itself. It's a general weakness. If you asked me to define his position in other words I should say 'peasant-soldier.' "

Petrusha spoke with a smile for he knew the "peasant-soldiers" of his race object to both words, declaring themselves proudly to be neither peasant nor soldier but Cossack.

The ogre choked. The blood rushed to his head and mixing with the wine already there threatened

a stroke. For a moment he could not speak, then he thumped his fist on the table and swore a great oath.

“And a Cossack turned scientist comes into my house on terms of equality and sneers at the Tzar!” he exclaimed.

Petrusha sprang up, all the Cossack in him blazing in his eyes. He held his glass in his hand and for an instant seemed about to dash it in his host's face. Then the stem snapped and the broken crystal fell on the table while a little golden rill trickled across the cloth. Petrusha flung the stem after it and spoke with heavy calm. “I have often heard you spoken of as mad, Vladimir Vladimirovich. Now I know the rumour to be true.”

He pushed back his chair and strode to the door. Max followed him.

“Where are you off to?” demanded the ogre, whose only retort to Petrusha's parting compliment had been a hoarse chuckle. He was really rather proud of his reputation for madness, perhaps flattering himself with Shakesperian reflections.

“If my friend is not good enough for you, neither am I, Vladimir Vladimirovich,” Max assured him.

The ogre pushed over a bottle, smashing one or two glasses, muttered something about “a pair of damned socialists,” poured himself out another glass of wine, and laughed noisily.

“To the confusion of all ‘reds,’ ” he cried. “Come, toss it off, André Andréévich.”

André Andréévich tossed it off, but wished himself well out of the “Yellow Castle.”

Max and Petrusha were putting on their cloaks in the hall, aided by Efime, who had heard their departing steps from his pantry, when Mária Alexandrovna rustled towards them.

“So soon?” she demanded. “Won’t you drink a cup of coffee with us?”

Petrusha—rather white about the mouth—seized upon his cap with one hand and held out the other to her.

“Good-bye, Mária Alexandrovna. I wish you well,” he said without answering her question.

Max followed his example and the two young men were down the steps before their hostess recovered from her astonishment.

“Efime, what does this mean?” she demanded sharply, as the footman refastened the heavy bolts and bars.

“By heaven, I know nothing, your Excellency,” replied Efime in his usual resigned tones.

Out in the icy air Petrusha drew a long breath, whistled, and said with conviction:

“What a *chudak!* I felt primitively angry for the moment. Wanted to fly at his throat like one of my blessed ancestors at a Pole. But, upon my

word, he is scarcely responsible. Max, it was *nasty* though—to a guest!”

“I only wonder he has n’t quarrelled with me before now. He’s at daggers drawn with most of his neighbours you know. Do you mind much?”

“I hardly know yet. I must analyse my sensations. As far as Gortchnikoff is concerned personally, not much. On the whole I’m glad to have felt that thrill of passionate rage. How my blood leapt! I’m two very distinct beings, my friend, Cossack and scientist, and sometimes the former—who is still a savage—gets the upper hand. Heredity is the very devil, Max. Why are you the decent fellow you are? Only thanks to the wholesome lives led by your immediate ancestors, so you need not be stuck up about it. Why is Nico Ostrougoff such a brute? Listen to the tales the peasants tell of his forefathers and you’ll know.”

“It may mean something, but not everything,” objected Max. “To take one example—where do you get your scientific tastes from?”

“From some forgotten ancestor, I dare swear, who used to spend the nights staring at the stars, which seem so peculiarly brilliant and near at hand from the steppes; and the sky and the wind were to him as books in which to read the coming weather, so that no doubt he was an unofficial ‘weather *chinovnik*,’ as that little English girl

called me. But I am Cossack to-night; the stars seem like my love's eyes. What is that?"

They were nearing the pavilion and suddenly a light flickered, steadied, and streamed out across the ghostly, glimmering darkness of the park. Max came to a standstill and looked at the lighted window. They could see Minnie standing by the lamp arranging the shade, then she pushed back the curls on her forehead, as she often did when tired and perplexed, and moved across the room to draw the shawl curtain. One moment she stood looking unseeingly across the white expanse while it seemed to Max that her eyes rested questioningly upon him, then the curtain blotted out all but a dim shadow. The young men turned towards the steps, descended them, and walked across the river; the freshly fallen but already frozen snow crackled under their feet, but the solid ice beneath held firm and hard as adamant. The night was moonless but the brilliance of stars and ice gleamed through the blue-black darkness.

"Max," said Korsakoff abruptly, "I envy Nico. He snatched his 'black-browed girl' away like the Cossack of the ballads. What if I went back now and claimed my love before them all? Yes, I love her, Max. I prated about sympathy and attraction and the intellectual interest of forming a character, but I know now by the fire in my veins that the base of it all is passion, the elementary passion which I thought study and

culture and a premature, nauseous nibble at forbidden fruit had driven out of me. What if I went back for her now? Ah, but I have no 'black-maned steed' in waiting; and she—she is an ignorant and arrogant child expecting from life she knows not what. I must mate with a *woman*."

"Lydia is an embryo woman, all unformed, less than half developed, narrowed by a narrow education, but with generous impulses. She has some of her father's good points and none of her mother's littlenesses."

"I used to think," went on Korsakoff, "that you were in love with her yourself."

"That's a question which I could not have answered myself at the time. Now, from a distance, I see clearer. We always do. Last winter I thought of marriage. I was lonely sometimes. I also thought it would be good to have a wife with a dowry. Sounds piggish, does n't it? But, oh Petrusha, if I had but one-twentieth part of Gortchnikoff's wealth! Good Lord, man, what could I not do with it? You know something of the state of our peasants. More than half the richer landlords don't live on their estates at all, others only come for a couple of months in the summer sometimes, and they don't know and don't care what goes on. But I do. If only I were not so cramped for means! You speak of the wholesome lives led by my immediate ancestors. Yes, my grandfather—God rest his soul—was one of the

best men in the world, but what a bad manager, Petrusha! Of course the Emancipation upset his affairs altogether and he did n't seem to be able to fall into the new ways, though he owned they were best. And the debts, Petrusha! I'll have to sell the forest in — where we've spent so many summers; after all it must go."

"A pity!" sighed Petrusha. "We've had some glorious days there, Max. Do you remember the nights in the huts, the rising at dawn, the days of hunting? But give me the steppe above all—the forests are stifling in comparison. But it's a pity, an awful pity. It seems like parting with something of our youth."

"I *must* sell it," said Max gloomily. "Well, as I said, I did think that Lydia would be the wife for me, once. I liked, and like her. She *is* interesting. But by degrees I found out that we have hardly anything in common. She would be miserable in the country and I simply could n't breathe in town for long. I never could. Remember how I used to chafe in Peter? She is made for quite a different life. She has just a touch of pedantry. Do you notice how fond she is of quotations? She can scarcely open her mouth without, 'Musset says,' or 'Lamartine speaks of,' or 'Hugo affirms.' Her authorities are somewhat antiquated, but give her a touch of modern culture and she'll be as ready with texts from Gorki or Nietzsche, Rostand, Minski, Ibsen,

Hauptmann, and all the rest of them. She ought to be a professor's wife, Petrúsha. She has just the sufficient tinge of blue."

"And that dream of yours is quite ended?"

"Quite. I swear, Korsakoff, that though I did think of her dowry it was n't Vladimir Vladimirovich's talk of giving her none which caused my gradual defection. He has always talked like that ever since I can remember and the girls were mere babies the question of whose dowries seemed very remote. I know that if either of his daughters marries a man he approves of he will give her a suitable marriage portion for all his talk. Not enough to satisfy a Petersburg aristocrat, but a considerable help for a clodhopper like myself; and he always rather liked me."

"And now I have lost you his liking."

"Oh, we were bound to have a row sooner or later. Gortchnikoff can't help quarrelling. But ——."

"Well?"

Max scrambled up the bank without answering, and when they were half-way towards the house said suddenly:

"Petrusha, do you think it would be very mad of me to marry?"

"Depends upon whom."

"A girl without a *kopeck*; bright, brave, with simple tastes. I love her truly, Petrusha. It was no judicious choosing of a probable wife this

time. I met her and — well, somehow it came to me quite simply that she was my future wife.”

“Marry her then. As she has ‘simple tastes’ she won’t ask you to change your way of life, and your children can always be educated for next to nothing as you are a *dvorianine*.”

“It’s all very easy to say ‘marry her,’” retorted Max, “but she must be wooed first and how am I to get a chance to speak to her now? I can’t lay wait in Gortchnikoff’s park as Nico used to do. Confound my unlucky tongue! Why did n’t I let the ogre growl to his heart’s content? Well, now I must wait till chance favours me, and if it does n’t I’ll write and ask her to marry me point-blank.”

Korsakoff was silent. There was little hope of chance favouring him, and a written proposal of marriage would not help matters in the least. Mária Alexandrovna would open and read it and Vladimir Vladimirovich would answer it. The doors of the “Yellow Castle” were closed to him for ever and the princess would not even try to break her bonds and come to him.

CHAPTER X

“ARISTOCRAT”

“YOUR father has insulted Peter Petrovich. I know it, I feel it!” exclaimed Madame Gortchnikova tragically, rustling back to her boudoir after the young men’s abrupt departure. In expectation of the presence of visitors the governesses had been dismissed, Seraphima Profirovna, who as usual was tramping and smoking, being considered quite an effectual body-guard in the present instance.

Lydia flushed slightly and moved aside to put her cup down upon a plaything of a table placed beneath a life-sized Venus draped from head to foot in a sheet. When her husband had removed the statues from the tower to the boudoir, Mária Alexandrovna had raised horrified objections to which the ogre had turned a deaf ear. The statues were in the way of the workmen, he declared,—for at that time he had been seized with a feverish desire to finish the upstairs rooms,—and the drawing-room, or as his wife called it the boudoir, though it was far too large for that dainty name, was the best place for them. There-

upon Maria Alexandrovna, with Seraphima Profirovna's approval, had transformed the suave beauty of the Venus, the nude charm of a Psyche, the splendid youth of an Apollo and an Antinous into “sheeted ghosts.”

Seraphima Profirovna never spoke of the statues except as “those naked creatures,” and the draping of them had been, in her opinion, the only good deed of her niece's life.

“Insulted Peter Petrovich!” echoed the old lady. “Now that's a pity. How are the girls to get married if he sends all the decent young men away?”

“I am a most unhappy woman,” cried Madame Gortchnikova, sinking on to her favourite low divan. “Leda, why don't you say something?”

“What am I to say, mamma?”

“Are you not sorry that Peter Petrovich has gone?”

“I am sorry if papa has insulted him.”

“Nothing else? Oh, you are very sly!”

Lydia kept a prudent silence, but her mother's irritation was bound to have a vent.

“Oh, you pretend to be so much above everybody else, and of course you never think of a young man as a possible husband. You only care about ‘cultivating your mind’ as you say. But you cannot say you are indifferent to Peter Petrovich. Since we have left town you have ‘often thought of him quite involuntarily’ and when you heard

he was staying at the duchess's 'an indescribable sensation like a vivid flash of great warmth and brightness passed over you.'"

Lydia went first rosy-red, then pale, but the splendid self-control she had attained through much tribulation enabled her to ask with at least a show of calmness, "Do you think you have the right to break into my drawers and read and quote from my diary, mamma?"

"Of course I have the right to do so. It is my duty to understand you, and you never will be properly frank and confiding. A young girl should not have locked drawers, especially when they are locked against her own mother. There are some books there which you must send back to Peter Petrovich. I saw his name on the fly-leaf, and you may write him a little note when you do so. Of course he will answer and I shall have nothing against it. Happily your father is seldom up when the postman comes. There are other books which I will return myself to that *coursiste*, Vèra Ardilionovna. I see that I did not look strictly enough after you when we were in Petersburg. But then I was so taken up with the duties of Society. I shall know what to do in future if ever your father lets us spend a winter in town again, which I doubt."

Lydia did not answer. The sympathetic pity which she sometimes felt for her mother was swallowed up in indignation at this last encroach-

ment on the little personal liberty she had managed to obtain. Besides, though she disdained to let it be seen, the knowledge that her most secret thoughts had been read by her mother and of course discussed with Fräulein made her writhe. She then and there resolved not to keep a diary any longer. The subject formed conversation for her next “English” day.

“Do you keep a diary, Miss?” she asked Minnie.

“No, and never did and never mean to. All emotions and circumstances strong enough to retain their hold upon my memory do so without my keeping a ledger for them, while all the weak and futile ones slip away from me, and so much the better! Continual dissection of one’s emotions must weaken them and at length destroy all spontaneity.”

“But self-culture—” began Lydia.

“Can be carried on in other than inky ways. Some plants die from over-culture and I think our souls are sometimes shrivelled up by the search-light of self-analysis. It has often been said that we cannot write what we really feel, only what we have felt. I think the same can be said of analysis, so that if we dissect our sensations they disappear.”

“Then you think we should not seek to know ourselves?”

“I don’t say that. Life generally shows us our own capabilities and limitations. But I don’t see

why we should be on the lookout for the slightest thrill of emotion. If we are we will end by having no real emotions at all, so that our self-searching will be but an unemotional quest of the emotionless for emotions."

Minnie was obliged to end every discussion with a laugh.

"And has Max Ardilionovich gone too?" demanded Seraphima Profirovna. "It's a great pity if Vladimir has quarrelled with him. He is a very respectable young man and you may be very glad to have him some day, Leda, when the notions you picked up from that *coursiste* have gone out of your head."

Tart though the words were in themselves the old lady could not use a harsh tone towards Lydia. The girl knew it, and never lost patience with the old lady's vagaries.

"Of course," said Maria Alexandrovna plaintively, "I don't really know what has happened or whether Peter Petrovich or Max Ardilionovich has been insulted or both or neither. But I *feel* there was some scandal and that Peter Petrovich was the insulted one. He looked so white. And if Vladimir won't receive him, our relations with the duchess and her family are at an end. Peter Petrovich is their guest, and they will all feel themselves insulted with him."

Here Lydia rose to leave the room, but her mother became so hysterically reproachful at the

idea of being deserted in such a crisis that she resumed her seat resignedly.

“Why don’t you finish your coffee, mamma? It is getting cold,” she remarked by way of diversion.

“I am overwhelmed at the wreck of your happiness and you talk of coffee!” exclaimed Mária Alexandrovna, lifting hands and eyes towards the unresponsive ceiling.

Lydia took refuge in silence, while Seraphima Profirovna and her niece discussed the probable causes and effects of the probable scene.

“I know what will happen next,” exclaimed Marusia with pettish despair. “Papa will quarrel with André Andréévich. Mamma, go and ask them to come and drink coffee.”

“Clever child!” exclaimed Mária Alexandrovna, patting the sallow cheek. “That is a good idea.”

She rose and passing through the hall peeped in at the dining-room, but judging an advance indiscreet, beat a rustling retreat.

“They did not notice me,” she reported, “and they seemed to be getting on so well together that I came away without disturbing them.”

But when Vladimir Vladimirovich dragged his guest up into the tower where he lost himself in contemplation of his phonographs and gramophones for more than three hours, Mária Alexandrovna regretted that she had not made an effort to secure André Andréévich. As for the latter himself, he really did not care what he did; listening to

different gramophones was neither more or less wearisome than the usual methods of passing the time at the "Yellow Castle." As he said to himself in vigorous Russian—it was "all one devil."

Nothing pleased or vexed the ogre more than interest in or indifference to his "machines," and André Andrévich's quiet sitting-out of a three-hours performance was accepted as a proof of the greatest interest and raised the Guardsman in his host's opinion. They came down to supper arm in arm, Vladimir Vladimirovich excitedly talking of technicalities which were as Greek to the younger man.

On descending to the lower regions the ogre was vexed to find them wrapped in a calm which was irritating to his now sociable mood. He went in search of his wife and daughters and though they were retiring for the night he induced them to dress again and put in an appearance at the supper table. To cross Vladimir Vladimirovich in one of his good-natured moods was to court a fierce fit of rage, all the fiercer for the suddenness of the change. He was rather put out at Minnie's absence. "She is a bright girl and I like to talk to her sometimes. Why did you send her to her room so early?" he demanded of his wife. "Jealous, eh? Well, of course, you can't understand any sentiment which is not broadly elementary. I like her. She interests me. There is something electric about her which charges the air around

her and wakes people up. She can't drink though,” he added regretfully, as he filled his wife's glass.

Marusia, who was mortally afraid of her father and consequently at her worst in his presence, did not lift her eyes from the table-cloth and looked tired and sleepy; Lydia was silent and preoccupied, while Maria Alexandrovna was visibly ill at ease and stifled many a yawn behind a dainty handkerchief. At length Vladimir Vladimirovich dismissed them with a rough joke at their lack of appreciation of gramophones and wine, and settled down to another bottle with André Andréévich.

This continuous drinking was telling sadly upon the Guardsman's nerves, accustomed though he was to dissipation. He had never seen anything to equal the ogre's capacity for a prolonged drinking bout. “The man must have nerves of iron,” he thought with a touch of admiration as his host popped another cork. At two o'clock André Andréévich was as drunk as Cassio, and having put an enemy into his mouth to steal away his brains was entirely at the mercy of the ogre, who was grimly determined upon getting at the root of the officer's behaviour.

“Come, speak out, we 're both men, you know, and though I live here in my tower like the wizard they call me, I do know something of the world—your world. Hard up, eh? Unlucky at cards

and too lucky in love; and I'm blessed if I know which is the more expensive."

And into such an open snare André Andréévich walked with drink-dazed eyes. He cursed his want of luck at cards, his costly success in love, raved of the beauty and extravagance of "La belle Poupée," and shed tears of envy and self-pity as he spoke of two of his younger comrades who had found brides whose dowries had saved the Guardsmen from the social extinction which is living death.

"And you seek the same way of salvation?" demanded the ogre with a wicked chuckle.

But the question steadied André Andréévich's flickering reason. Vladimir Vladimirovich was obliged to make his mode of attack more subtle and open another bottle. Before it was finished André Andréévich's soul—or what took the place of it—was laid bare to his host's eyes, and though the revelation was no surprise to the latter he could scarcely restrain himself from rising mightily in his wrath and roughly piloting his tipsy guest to the doors of the "Yellow Castle."

At three o'clock André Andréévich pillowed his head on his arms and, muttering disjointed sentences such as "behave decently to my wife—good old name—fine position—Society—amusement," went to sleep.

Then Vladimir Vladimirovich arose and surveyed him with an expression of the deepest dis-

gust. With folded arms swept by his grey-streaked beard, eyes glittering wickedly beneath heavy brows, he looked —though booted and belted like a yeoman—wizard-like enough to justify the popular tradition.

“Faugh!” he exclaimed aloud at length. “And that’s an aristocrat!”

Turning on his heel he went in search of Efime to whom he entrusted his helpless guest.

He himself spent the night in his den in the tower, and the peasants, stirring in the late winter morning, saw the light growing pale in the dawn, and crossing themselves muttered a charm against the wizard.

CHAPTER XI

“YOUR INTENTIONS?”

AFTER several hours' heavy sleep André Andréévich awoke with a splitting headache and an uneasy mind. Looking at his watch he saw that it was half-past eleven, and cursed the necessity of putting in an appearance at lunch. Icy cold water freshened his faculties sufficiently to enable him to descend to the dining-room and get through the mid-day meal with a show of decent cheerfulness. The ogre's absence was a decided relief to him.

“It would be very nice to go skating this afternoon,” declared Mária Alexandrovna. “Leda, do you know where the skates are?”

“I believe papa locked them away somewhere in the tower with the croquet and tennis sets. In his workshop, I think.”

The workshop was a mysterious sanctum beyond the gramophone room, into which only the ogre, Makàr, and such technical experts as Vladimir Vladimirovich could inveigle to his tower were ever allowed to penetrate.

“Then we won’t get them till the winter is over,” exclaimed Maria Alexandrovna with pardonable petulance.

As skating was out of the question, sledging was suggested and decided upon; but the coachman and horses were so used to idleness, and the former, at least, so averse to changing what he had grown to consider his natural and lawful state, that there was always a long and dreary interval between an order and its execution, except on those rare occasions when Vladimir Vladimirovich gave the command.

When Efime, entering the room above the stables, prefaced his demand for horses by “Her Excellency says,” Stepàn would finish his pipe or his nap on the stove and then enter into a lengthy discussion as to the state of the required horses which necessitated several journeys to and from the house, one of the ogre’s rules being that the outdoor servants should never enter the “Yellow Castle” itself. But when it was—“Vladimir Vladimirovich commands”—the effect was instantaneous, Stepàn having a vague idea that his master, being leagued with all the powers of darkness, could fearfully and mysteriously take vengeance for service ill-performed. Only the extreme rarity of these commands and the almost unlimited leisure he enjoyed reconciled Stepàn to remaining in the service of the “*proklätie kaldoon*” whose only good point

was his utter indifference to the state of his horses.

On this particular afternoon Stepàn was a degree quicker than usual, and within an hour and a half after the issuing of the order Madame Gortchnikova was whirled away with her daughters and her guest, leaving Minnie to delight in a free afternoon's skating, Seraphima Profirovna to her musical slumbers, and Fräulein to look over her charges' drawers, her favourite method of employing her rare leisure hours.

Not long afterwards Vladimir Vladimirovich emerged from his den, and descended to the lower regions, where the only sounds which broke the stillness were an occasional scream from the parrot, which could never be taught any word but *dourak* (fool), and a gentle snore from Seraphima Profirovna. Pasha and Akulina sat in the anteroom diligently cross-stitching towels, though the latter was sitting on a pack of cards by which she had been telling her companion's fortune when disturbed by the ogre's footsteps.

Vladimir Vladimirovich, catching sight of them as he passed through the hall, sent them to—, the basement.

"I can't understand," he exclaimed impatiently on entering the dining-room, "why you always like to be surrounded by a pack of gossiping peasants!"

A prolonged snore was the only answer. Seraphima Profirovna was sleeping in her usual

position—legs stretched out and far apart, head on the arm of the chair, and cap on the back of her head. Vladimir Vladimirovich crossed the room and shook her impatiently, causing her to start up with a cry of “Touch me not, Vladimir, touch me not!”

“Oh, come now, I don’t go out, so you need n’t be afraid of my having come from dogs to you,” protested her nephew.

“You have been to Petersburg!”

“Well, I’ve been back nearly three days and I only spent one day there. Beastly long journey! Nearly four days and nights. When are we going to have a direct line from X—I should like to know? The service of the branch lines is so idiotically arranged! Does n’t connect properly to allow the passengers to catch the express at the junctions. Asses!”

With this somewhat vaguely addressed compliment Vladimir Vladimirovich threw himself into a chair and demanded, “Where is Mária?”

“Sledging with the girls and André Andréevich.”

“That pig!” was the ogre’s terse comment.

“He is not ‘sympathetic,’” admitted the old lady. “But why is he a pig?”

Glad of a listener, Vladimir Vladimirovich plunged into an account of the night’s disclosures.

“I would rather my daughter married a simple mechanic than that fine aristocrat! The base-

ness, the corruption, the mercantile calculation of the fellow! Spoke of his mistress one minute and asked me for my daughter the next. *Merzavetz!*"

"He was drunk, of course," put in Seraphima Profirovna.

"Ha-ha! So much the better, or the worse. When a man is drunk he shows himself as he really is. And that one! Corrupt—corrupt—rotten to the core! And he calls himself a noble! Noble indeed! Give me a man,—peasant, workman, mechanic, what you will, but a *man*,—and I'll be proud to give him my hand!"

Vladimir Vladimirovich had evidently entirely forgotten that only the evening before he had insulted a guest on the score of his lowly birth.

"I know that type," he went on, thrusting his hands into his belt and pacing the room. "My sister married one, poor girl! She was not content with being a simple *dvorianka*, and thought it would be fine to be 'Princess.' Well, she was 'Princess,' and much good it did her! Her princely husband spent her money on his mistresses, made love to her waiting-women before her eyes, and was always going abroad on 'affairs of state' and leaving her alone. Her spirit was soon broken. She was an old woman when she died, though this side forty. She did n't know what she was doing when she married him. But I'll open my girls' eyes, and I'll never let them buy a man's name and position. Yes, it's simply

barter. I tell you, aunt, if a girl understands, she virtually says to the man, ‘Take away from me the reproach of being an old maid, and I’ll pay your debts, pay for your pleasures, pay all you like, only make me *une grande dame*. Faugh!—it makes me sick! They call it ‘marriage’—there is a base name which is truer of such bargains.”

“I always did say that André Andréévich was a profligate, and Mária as good as called me indecent,” drawled Seraphima Profirovna.

“Profligate? Of course he is. What else can you expect from an aristocrat? Don’t I know that even the schools of the nobles are hotbeds of vice, premature and hideous? Yet I sent the boy to one! Good God, how weak I am! Why don’t I cut it all and go and live among decent, naked savages, taking Pavloosha with me?”

He flung himself into a chair again, tugged at his beard, and sat in gloomy silence till the ringing of the bell announced the return of the sledge-party; then he arose, and strode to the door.

“It is just dinner-time, Voloda,” Seraphima Profirovna reminded him.

Vladimir Vladimirovich waved his hand as if dismissing all such mundane questions. “I shall not dine,” he said, and reascended to his tower.

During the drive and the ensuing dinner André Andréévich was enduring a maddening

self-examination—"Did I commit myself hopelessly last night? What did I say? Was I a perfect fool?" But his confused and aching brain could not evolve definite answers.

Dinner passed off gaily, in spite of, or rather because of Vladimir Vladimirovich's absence, and André Andréévich's inward questionings. He was glad to go straight from the dining-room to his hostess's sanctum, where he tried to forget a very indifferent dinner over a cup of excellent Turkish coffee and an incomparable cigar. His strained nerves were gradually relaxing when a Jovian voice called down the echoing staircase leading from the tower, "Efime!" A minute's silence and the call was repeated in even louder tones, with the addition of one of the ogre's favourite epithets.

Mària Alexandrovna threw a despairing glance at Lydia, who rose and left the room in search of Efime, whose quarters were separated from the rest of the house by a heavy door which that resigned servitor closed when there seemed to be no immediate call for his services.

As to the bells, not one of them was in working order, despite the mechanical genius of the master of the house.

As Lydia entered the pantry she found Efime lying full length on the floor with his head on a bag of flour; he rose leisurely to his feet, as his young mistress appeared, and slowly toiled

up-stairs to receive the orders of Vladimir Vladimirovich.

“His Excellency asks your Nobleness to go upstairs,” he reported, coming to the boudoir door a few minutes later, and addressing André Andréévich.

The Guardsman rose reluctantly and mounted the tower-stairs, morally certain that it was now his turn to quarrel with the master of the “Yellow Castle.”

But the reception he met with eased his mind. The ogre looked tired, sallow, and hollow-eyed, but courteously motioned his guest to a seat on the divan beside him and offered him a cigar. He followed up these preliminaries with a few harmless remarks, but did not deign to allude to or make any excuse for his non-appearance downstairs.

At length he leant back against the wall, and letting the hand which held his cigar drop on to his knee, he said pleasantly: “If I understood you aright, André Andréévich, last night you made me a proposal for my elder daughter.”

André Andréévich decided to cross the Rubicon. “I should count it an honour to be your son-in-law, Vladimir Vladimirovich, and a great happiness to be the husband of Mária Vladimirovna,” he said urbanely, thinking meanwhile, “Now I’ve done it!”

“I am honoured, André Andréévich,” said the

ogre, no less urbanely. Then, with a sudden change to a brisk business tone: "I will give my daughter a complete trousseau and three thousand roubles on her wedding-day. Her legal portion of my estate she will receive at my death. Does that suit you?"

André Andréévich turned cold with horror but kept his outward calm.

"*De grace*, Vladimir Vladimirovich," he protested; "why treat the matter in such a—excuse the phrase—commercial way? We are nobles."

"I thank you for reminding me of the fact, André Andréévich. So you will not hear of a dowry? Well, you are like me. I married my wife for herself, not for her money. It seems quite natural, of course. Still there are men base enough to care only for the money. But I must insist on giving my daughter a little present. It need not concern you."

"Of course not," said André Andréévich sincerely. Three hundred pounds certainly were not worth his consideration.

"Then it is settled? I may congratulate myself on having you for a son-in-law?" demanded the ogre with seeming rapture.

André Andréévich wished himself anywhere else in the world rather than in a tower shut up with a *chudak* anxious to be his father-in-law. At first he thought of accepting the situation for the time being, and then, when once in town, to cut the

connection by the simple method of silence. But on second thoughts he decided that Vladimir Vladimirovich was not the man to accept insult quietly, and was more than capable of coming up to town and making some hideous, brutal scandal which would inevitably end in his—André Andréevich’s—expulsion from the regiment. Moreover, the *chudak* had good connections and it really would not do to trifle with his daughter. The few seconds in which André Andréevich thus reviewed the situation seemed to him to be hours. He felt Vladimir Vladimirovich’s gleaming eyes upon him, called up all his *savoir-faire*, and said: “Allow me a little time for reflection, Vladimir Vladimirovich. Though I am entirely of your opinion as to the impropriety of seeking a wife merely for her dowry, yet there are, I must admit, some practical considerations inseparable from the idea of marriage. Unfortunately I am not a rich man; our pay, as you know, is not nearly sufficient to meet our expenses, yet my position—especially if I marry—demands an expensive way of living. I must consider whether I have the right to drag a delicately nurtured girl into the life of comparative poverty which will be my lot if on my marriage I leave the regiment and obtain some post in the provinces. Yet to remain in the Guards and live as we officers must would mean speedy ruin. You see my position. Can I ask your daughter to

share with me either poverty and seclusion, or a life of uncertain luxury threatened hourly by ruin?"

"Such considerations come rather late and yet too suddenly it seems to me," declared the ogre, still courteous but with ominously twitching nostrils. "You most distinctly proposed for my daughter scarcely a minute ago. You must have thought the matter out. Yet hardly have I given my consent than you think of objections. How is that?"

This was a decided poser, but André Andréévich rose to the occasion. "I won't give him the chance to make a vulgar row," he decided, as he said suavely:

"I had not dared to 'think the matter out,' Vladimir Vladimirovich. My mind was a confusion of hopes and fears and harassing but formless doubts. How could I dare to hope that you would accept me—a penniless officer—noble, it is true, but penniless—as your son-in-law? It is only now that I have your consent that other sordid but, alas! very real obstacles present themselves. It is always so. One only sees the obstacle immediately in front, and not till it is overcome does another present itself."

"Cleverly lied!" cried Vladimir Vladimirovich in a vibrating voice and rising suddenly to his feet. "Come, enough of this comedy! Has n't it sickened you! Last night you said, 'Give me your gold, *chudak*, you have more than enough,

and I will give your daughter my name and position.’ Upon my word, if you repeated that now you are sober I should not despise you as utterly as I do.”

André Andréévich also rose from the divan, turned several shades paler, and said stiffly: “I bear with you, Vladimir Vladimirovich, because as *Gospodin* Korsakoff said last night, you are not responsible for your words and actions. Only a madman would call a man despicable for observing the laws of good society.”

Gortchnikoff laughed his dry, mocking laugh “Madmen speak the truth; hear it for once, you penniless but noble officer!”

“I don’t wish to have anything more to do with a madman,” declared André Andréévich moving towards the door.

But Gortchnikoff’s rage had slipped the leash and was not to be checked by any consideration, whatever. The laws of hospitality were forgotten, and prudence or fear he had never known. He placed his back against the door and, folding his arms, faced André Andréévich.

“You, calling yourself an officer and a *dvorianine*, come here hoping to induce me to buy your name and ‘position’ for my daughter. You overrate your goods, merchant! My name is no less ancient than yours, my position a free one while you—why, you are nothing but one of the Tzar’s armed lackeys!”

This was good for a man who had but the night before drunk confusion to all socialists, and had spoken of "loyalty to the Tsar" as the first duty of a *dvorianine*, but André Andréévich was too wild with rage to think of any such retort. He merely uttered a stifled cry and sprang forward as if to strike his insulter.

"Take care," thundered Gortchnikoff, clenching a formidable fist and putting himself on the defensive, "if you attempt to strike me, I'll smash your head like a nut!"

"If I were armed," stammered André Andréévich in a voice half-inarticulate with rage, "you, you would not dare——"

Vladimir Vladimirovich laughed wickedly, fumbled in his pockets with his left hand without relaxing his defiant attitude, and producing a revolver flung it at the other's feet.

"Pick it up and shoot me," he said coolly, "and avenge that precious honour of yours. Honour, great God! Strange creed, which resents truth above all things, and while looking upon a digression from 'the laws of polite society' as a crime, permits a man to live at the expense of a woman!"

André Andréévich could never explain to himself why he did not send a bullet between his insulter's gleaming eyes. Perhaps it was because of the vaguely comforting conviction that the latter was indeed mad, perhaps it was that in order to shoot he must have stooped to pick up the

weapon from the floor. Blind rage is often spurred forward or turned aside by such trifles. Besides, though one may be in a towering rage, it is not easy to shoot a man with his own pistol even if he has called you a lackey.

“You shall hear from me, Vladimir Vladimirovich—” he began.

“A duel?” laughed Gortchnikoff. “I refuse to fight now and for ever, though I’m a good shot and might rid the world of you. But there are so many like you that it really is n’t worth while.”

“If a civilian refuses an officer’s challenge—”

“The officer thrashes him. Well, try it!”

He moved from the door as he spoke but never shifted his gaze from the other’s face. André. Andréévich hesitated a second and then left the room with a parting “You are quite mad.”

Mària Alexandrovna and her daughters were awaiting his return with varied feelings of anxiety and curiosity. The former’s nerves were strained to the uttermost.

“I am sure papa will spoil everything,” complained Marusia. “He must be in one of his bad moods to-day because he shuts himself up.”

No one answered her. Seraphima Profirovna had gone to her own room, Lydia was thinking of something else, and Mària Alexandrovna was too nervous to speak.

The jingle of spurs announced the approach of André Andréévich. He entered the room slightly

paler than when he had left it, but quite composed.

"I am very unfortunate," he asserted. "Vladimir Vladimirovich has just handed me a telegram from my cousin in X—demanding my immediate return. Of course there is nothing to do but obey. I can just catch the ten o'clock train if I start at once."

He bent over his hostess's hand and kissed it; turning to Marusia he held her hand a second longer than is customary, then raised it to his lips, his eyes seeming to ask forgiveness for this breach of etiquette.

Maria Alexandrovna scarcely spoke; she could not trust herself to do so calmly, and this woman, who scolded her daughters in language worthy of a fishwife and went into wild hysterics over the merest trifle, would never have allowed herself to make a scene before a guest.

Two hours after his interview with Vladimir Vladimirovich, Tchisinsky sat alone in a first-class carriage reviewing the situation. It was certainly bad enough, but André Andréévich did not give way to despair. It was not the first time he had had unpleasant interviews with outspoken fathers and brothers, some of them of a class utterly ignorant of the "laws of polite society." There had been no witness of the late disagreeable scene, so that there was no fear of open scandal. To be called "an armed lackey" is decidedly unpleasant,

but to assure yourself that the man who called you so is mad is the best way of reconciling yourself to the situation, and this André Andréévich did. He also reflected that the words were an insult not only to himself but to the whole army and even to the Tzar, and that if his Majesty must—though unwittingly—put up with it, surely he himself could do the same.

“And then the fellow is mad, raving mad,” he repeated aloud, which was, after all, the greatest consolation.

And so the last of the Dukes left the “Yellow Castle.”

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PART III

CHANGES

CHAPTER I

HINTS

THE duchess was forced to confess to herself that her flight into Russia had been a failure. Korsakoff had returned to town sublimely unconscious of the honour she had destined for him, Nico Ostrougoff had delivered himself into the hands of "an unscrupulous and unprincipled woman," and the Gortchnikoffs, the only wealthy family for miles round who lived on their estate in the winter, had gone into absolute retirement, no longer receiving even the very few neighbours with whom the wizard of the "Yellow Castle" had not, as yet, quarrelled.

After three weeks of mortal dulness she announced and carried out her intention of going to Petersburg on a visit to her relations, taking her daughters with her. Vèra had long since returned to her Institute, so that Max was once more left to the quiet of his well-beloved steppe.

Sometimes his days were brightened by a meeting with Minnie, alone or with one or other of her pupils. If the latter, he passed on with a bow, not wishing to give any one the shadow of a right to say that he carried on a clandestine acquaintance with Gortchnikoff's daughters. When she was alone he stopped to speak and skate with her; yet in spite of his perseverance he did not seem to make much progress with his wooing. She was not the type of woman to be won by pretty speeches; she evidently regarded a compliment as simply a more or less objectionable personal remark, and to do Max justice he was not given to paying them. He had passed the stage where looks are all-important. Minnie was herself with him, and as such, something better than perfection; but not a mere woman whose personal appearance could be discussed, criticised or admired. He would have found it difficult to describe her in words. He did not speculate now as to the colour and expression of her changeful eyes. Those eyes were *hers*.

She was openly glad to see him, talked in as bright and friendly a manner as ever, and was always ready to cross hands with him for a swift glide up or down the river, but that sense of absolute and seemingly endless nearness to her which had possessed him the night he had met her so unexpectedly in a whirling snow-storm did not return. She held smilingly aloof from him. A

cloud had risen up between them—fleecy and flecked with sunshine—but still a cloud.

It was really very dreary at the “Yellow Castle.” The master thereof was seized with a lasting fit of gloom, and rarely descended from his tower. Only once since the unlucky New Year had visitors called—a young squire and his newly wedded wife returning from Paris and staying on their estate for a few days on their way to Moscow. Maria Alexandrovna was childishly glad to see them, and sent Lydia to ring the only bell in the house which was in working order, an old-fashioned clanging bell connecting the bedroom with the tower and used to announce a pressing need of the wizard’s presence. It sounded throughout the house, but Vladimir Vladimirovich did not deign to pay any attention, and Maria Alexandrovna had to make all possible and impossible excuses for her husband’s absence, knowing all the while that they would not be accepted, and that if the young couple passed the summer on their estate her daughters would not profit by the gay society likely to be assembled there.

André Andréévich’s dismissal had been the signal for a succession of scenes over which a veil must be drawn. Gortchnikoff, when enraged, cast reserve to the winds, and fought the matter out with his wife, taking the whole household into his confidence. Sometimes, indeed, he condescended to speak French, but more often dis-

dained even that method of secrecy. "Do you suppose"—he would exclaim—"that they don't know much more about our affairs than we do ourselves?"

The net result of the coming of the Dukes was disastrous. The ogre laid down a law, which he declared to be as inviolable as that of the Medes and Persians, that no young man should enter his house except as the accepted and acknowledged fiancé of one of his daughters.

"How are they to get engaged, I should like to know, if you don't allow them to see any one?" demanded Mária Alexandrovna in high-toned exasperation. "Surely you don't expect them to get married in the Eastern fashion?"

"It's the best way, after all. The parents arrange the matter, the young people are married, and there's an end of it. It saves a lot of trouble and deception and that abominable flirting."

"My girls are not veiled Turks, Vladimir Vladimirovich, but Orthodox Russians. Do you wish them to be old maids?"

"I'm sure I don't care if they are. It is the better part. And I tell you, Mária Alexandrovna, that I will *not* permit them to be bartered away in marriage. If a decent man wants to marry either of them let him take her with my blessing if she wishes to go with him. But no money-baits! I'll not countenance legalised Alphonsism and prostitution."

“Vladimir!” screamed his wife in horror, “remember before whom you are speaking!”

The ogre laughed nastily. “O—ho! Good, plain words frighten you, do they, Mária Alexandrovna? But the deeds themselves you wink at and even encourage. A pack of hypocrites, you women! And men are not much better. But I’m sick of this discussion, and here’s my ultimatum. My daughters have been talked about too much already, here, in town, and in Petersburg, what with Mr. Wonsovich and his tribe, Korsakoff that Cossack-scientist, that utterly despicable rag of an André Andréévich whom I sent flying, and that young Galovkine always hanging about. I’ve had more than enough of would-be suitors. From to-day no unmarried man under sixty enters this house but as my accepted son-in-law. I have said it!”

And Vladimir Vladimirovich thumped the table emphatically, and drew his brows together in approved wizard fashion.

Instead of waiting wisely for the turn of the tide, Mária Alexandrovna flung herself against the angry current with stormy consequences. The discussion ended in a threat of divorce from Vladimir Vladimirovich, and a fit of hysterics from his wife. Fräulein came rushing to the rescue with smelling-salts and soothing-drops and Slav-Teutonic exclamations, and the ogre stalked up-stairs to his tower, where he remained for several days, only

descending in the small hours to demolish the cold dishes encircling his plate.

Marusia fell into a state of utter listlessness worse than the first. Neither threats nor entreaties could move her from her bed till late in the afternoon, and if literally forced from that stronghold she subsided on to the floor or into a chair, keeping the same position for hours, unwashed, undressed, and absolutely indifferent to everything around her.

During those dreary weeks Minnie's dislike of Maria Alexandrovna turned to pity. The latter was certainly small-minded and shallow-hearted, incapable of taking any but a strictly individual view of life; but she was unsuitably mated, and the unhappiness arising from such a state surely atones for a multitude of sins. To shut up Maria Alexandrovna in the "Yellow Castle," chained to such a conflicting character as that of the ogre, was like breaking a butterfly upon a wheel; for she was of the butterfly type of woman, and married to an ordinary man who behaved decently to her in the eyes of Society and gave her enough money and amusement she would have flitted about very pleasantly and done no harm to any one. Placed as she was she vented her ill-humour on every one around her, and exercised her woman's love of power in petty tyrannies. To expect such a woman to take an interest in the peasants would have been as

unreasonable as to bid the butterfly ponder upon the sunless life of the worm. "The people" were to Mária Alexandrovna a separate race of savages. She had built and peopled her almshouse, sent Pasha with money to most of those who came to complain of hard times, and felt that she had done more than was required of her.

In those dreary weeks Lydia grew to understand and appreciate Minnie, while her own character lost something of its angularity by constant contact with that of one whose strength was so masked with sweetness as to be unrecognisable at first.

On receipt of her first month's salary and the repayment of her travelling expenses, Minnie had subscribed to her favourite English review, and though for a time she refused to let Lydia read it, as it contained ideas which would have horrified Mária Alexandrovna, she yielded at length. Once Madame Gortchnikova, coming into the room during the reading of an article, overheard a sentence which did not meet with her approval. She took the book from Minnie and scanned the pages with a frown; but the article was so utterly beyond her comprehension that, afraid of betraying her ignorance, she handed it back in silence.

And so February drew to a close, and March softened the earth, liberated the river, changed the snow into bogs and the icicles into streams. Max could no longer meet Minnie on the river;

its scattered ice-blocks glittered in the spring sunshine and slowly melting merged their once adamantine brilliance in the deepening current.

In her journeys to and fro across the park Minnie was obliged to wear the high boots of the peasants—a child's size fitted her—and, changing them in the back corridors of the "Yellow Castle," left them there, miniature monuments of mud. Often the daily walk with her pupils had to be foregone, and sometimes only her extreme swiftness and lightness of foot saved her from being literally stuck in the mud. Madame Gortchnikova had offered her Mademoiselle's room, but as it was simply the girls' dressing-room with a corner curtained off for Fräulein, Minnie insisted on keeping her old quarters and put up cheerfully with the inconvenience of transit.

One morning as she neared the big house she passed a peasant in the court-yard leaning against a tree, his eyes fixed on the front entrance. The dogs were barking furiously in a circle round him but he took not the slightest notice of them. At sight of Minnie he approached and begged her to speak to *barin* on his behalf; for stories of the influence of the strange *barishna* over the wizard had been set afloat in the village by Akulina.

"*Barin* is in the tower. I hardly ever see him. What is it you want?"

The man entered into a long explanation in a dialect and accent so unfamiliar to Minnie that

she could scarcely understand a word,—“land”—“hunger”—“family”—“poverty”—were distinct among a mass of incomprehensible adjurations and entreaties,—so repeating that *barin* was in the tower she moved on.

The peasant resignedly took up his position again and fixed his eyes upon the house.

It was particularly muddy that day so that the girls did not go out, but whenever Minnie passed the hall window she saw that patient, immovable figure leaning against the tree.

And scarcely a day passed without bringing one or more of such patient watchers, who when *Mària Alexandrovna* or the girls left the house approached with petitions the humility of which was at times strangely at variance with the expression of the dark eyes burning beneath the black brows. Minnie, noticing that look several times, concluded that there was more doggedness than meek patience in the men who waited hours at a stretch for a sight of one of the family at the “Yellow Castle.”

“What is it they want?” she asked Lydia.

“Land,” was the brief answer, and Leda drew her brows together nervously.

But *Akulina* was more communicative.

“There’s another of them,” she exclaimed one day, as Minnie stood in the hall toying with the parrot. *Marusia*, whose English day it was, lay obstinately in bed.

At Akulina's remark, Minnie, glancing out of the window, saw a middle-aged peasant leaning against a tree, both hands clasped on his stick which was planted on the ground in front of him.

It was raining, and the lakes in the park were encroaching on the still white expanse of snow.

"He will get wet through!" she exclaimed, "and what is the good of his waiting? No one will go out to-day."

"So we've all told him. But he said may the devil devour his liver if he does n't wait till he gets speech with one of the *ghospoda*."

Efime, in high boots and a coarse cloak flung over his livery, crossed the court at that moment from the kitchen, and stopping to speak to the watcher, evidently counselled resignation and departure, while the other doggedly planted his stick more firmly in the ground, and apparently repeated the offer of his liver to the devil in the event of his quitting his post.

"He's only wasting his time," declared Akulina. "He won't get *barin* to give him the land for any reason in the world. *Barin* said he will not let the land, and he won't. May my eyes burst on the spot if I speak not truth."

"Does *barin* wish to cultivate the land for himself?" asked Minnie perplexedly.

"God save you, *barishna!* Why should he? The steward will see that we get bread from

X—. *Barin* has another village there. But he will not give the land here to our peasants. They offended him. Their lease is up, and he won't give them the land again, no, not for all the gold in the world. *Barin* is rich. He needs not gold."

"But the peasants need the land," said Minnie.

"Yes, *barishna*, we need it. It will be an awful winter. But *barin* won't give it."

Minnie understood Lydia's avoidance of the subject now. To wilfully let several acres of good land run to waste in order to satisfy a petty spite against the peasants is an act which will not bear discussion when the perpetrator is your own father.

As Vladimir Vladimirovich never went out and rarely emerged from his tower, the peasants could only weary the steward with petitions and intercept Mária Alexandrovna or her daughters as they left the house to walk in the park.

"My good people," Madame Gortchnikova would say, "I am really very sorry for you but *barin* will not renew your leases,—so what can I do? You have some land of your own."

"But not enough to feed us all—we have families. *Matoushka*, Mária Alexandrovna, *barina*, plead for us! We shall starve."

"It is n't my fault. I can do nothing, I tell you." And she would turn into the park where the petitioners dared not follow her.

But once a young peasant, the father of three little children, lifted his hand and menaced the fur-clad, retreating figure.

"May God punish thee, thou well-fed!" he muttered turning away.

When, during one of his rare appearances at dinner, Vladimir Vladimirovich was told of these petitions, he swore that if the servants allowed those loafing peasants to hang about the courtyard he would dismiss the whole pack without wages.

"Wait till I've finished the wall," he exclaimed, "and then no vagabond shall ever enter my gates." At present only an open court-yard and an unfinished wall lay between the "Yellow Castle" and the road, while the park was bounded only by the river.

The dreariness of the weather, together with the desolation of the "Yellow Castle," told seriously upon Maria Alexandrovna's nerves, while Marusia looked more corpse-like than ever, and it was only after harrowing scenes that she could be induced to leave her room. The girl was undoubtedly a hypochondriac, and the seclusion of her life aggravated the disease. Every time the ogre emerged from his seclusion his wife attacked him on the subject of a return to town for the sake of Marusia, and at length, seeing that she really looked more dead than alive, Vladimir Vladimirovich determined to send for a specialist from the

government town. The great man arrived and his verdict—though agreeing with Professor Ivanoff's as regards fresh air, exercise, and cold water—induced Vladimir Vladimirovich to consent to another trip to town.

“But I don't understand you,” he protested; “you say my daughter has no organic disease, which means, I take it, that there is nothing the matter with her but the vapours and ill-temper and idleness. I am never dull in the country—no healthy-minded man should be—and I wish my family to remain here with me. My daughters have every comfort and I don't choose to let them go gadding about in town trying to catch husbands by showing their shoulders.”

Though Vladimir Vladimirovich abhorred Tolstoi as a revolutionist, atheist, and sower of sedition, he not infrequently and quite unconsciously echoed the sentiments of the “great writer of the Russian land.” His ideas upon marriage and the intercourse which leads to it might have been taken bodily from *The Kreutzer Sonata*, which, by the way, he had never read.

“Oh—ho, my fine fellow,” thought the doctor. “You are in need of my science yourself, I see. And you consider yourself ‘a healthy-minded man’!”

“My daughter shall remain here,” repeated Vladimir Vladimirovich. “If she is really ill she shall have every care, but I'm not going to

humour her whims and fancies by letting her go to town."

"Then I cannot answer for her reason," said the doctor bluntly.

The ogre drew his brows together and stared at the specialist.

"Oh, I see you have been speaking to my wife, and she has influenced your verdict," he said drily.

"Sir!" exclaimed the doctor, and his steady eyes stared the other's down. "You sent for me to give you my advice and I do so in all honour. If you choose to disregard it, it's your own affair, of course, and I wash my hands of the consequences. The best cure for your daughter would be marriage, though any man who thinks of his posterity will think twice before marrying a hypochondriac. But change she must have, if you value her reason."

Forced to yield to his wife's wishes, Vladimir Vladimirovich did so with a bad grace. He was really concerned about Marusia, but did not believe in the efficacy of the proposed cure.

"But Lydia shall remain at home," he declared, "she is not ill."

All Maria Alexandrovna's efforts to soften this sentence were unavailing, but Lydia herself was only too glad to be left behind. She knew by bitter experience that a stay in town was by no means an unmixed pleasure.

So Mária Alexandrovna and Marusia returned to the Hydropathic Establishment and the devoted care of Nicolas Gregorovich, while Lydia remained with Minnie at the "Yellow Castle."

CHAPTER II

AT NICO'S

THE spring came, as it always does in Russia, with surprising swiftness. Patches of slowly melting snow whitened the young green of the steppe spangled with violets and other spring flowers, and sometimes Minnie and Lydia pushing away the snow found the delicate buds, with the blue peeping from their green sheaths, fresh and fair beneath. To this meeting of two seasons each had brought its best. Spring,—fresh softness, scents, and clear skies; winter,—the white of the snow, the splendour of the floating ice-blocks, the tingling touch that banishes languor.

Even to breathe in such pure, aromatic air is delight. Minnie began to understand Max's love for the steppe as she followed the windings of the river with Lydia, and the wind, blowing untainted across miles of steppe from the distant sea, swept across her face with a touch soft and fresh as mingled snow and sun-rays.

Max Galovkine, riding along the bank towards Ostrougoff's,—thirty versts away,—drew up involuntarily at sight of her. She had been so much

in his thoughts that it was a sheer impossibility not to stop and speak. He leant from the saddle to shake hands with her, and then turning to Lydia smiled apologetically as their hands met.

Now he had stopped he scarcely knew what to say in explanation of his action, and merely remarked upon the beauty of the flowers Lydia was carrying.

"And you—don't you like flowers, Miss Minnie? I see you have none."

"I love them—growing and fresh; but I don't like to pick them. It seems even cruel."

Max laughed. The flower subject was exhausted, so he made a brilliant remark about the weather, and then said rather awkwardly, "Well, good-bye. I'm off to Ostrougoff's."

"Give Claire my love," said Lydia, with a flush that was rather conscious.

"And mine, too," added Minnie, with perfect ease.

There was nothing more to be said. Max lifted his cap and rode on.

"Papa will be terribly vexed if he has seen us from the windows," observed Lydia, with the ghost of a smile, glancing towards the "Yellow Castle."

"Down stepped Lord Roland from his tower.

Oh, Lady Clare, you shame your worth—"

quoted Minnie gaily. "What were you to do,

pray? Cry 'Touch me not?' like Seraphima Profirovna, and fly across the steppe?"

Max rode on to Nico's and found him—like a model husband—sitting with Claire in the dining-room and drinking tea. The house was wooden, rather small, and somewhat dilapidated, but Claire had already worked wonders with the interior. There had been no real mistress in the house for years. Nico's mother had left her husband four years after marriage, and he had never taken the trouble to sue for a divorce. He had sent his wife her passport and told her picturesquely to go exactly where she chose, but never to dare to return to him or try to see her children.

Nico and his brother had grown up in a lawless, rickety household, where "housekeepers" had succeeded each other with amazing rapidity. Lithe, dark-eyed Little Russian peasants, large, blond Great Russians, graceful, mincing Polish ladies from town; while a sprightly Parisian, and a phlegmatic, fair-haired German, had, at different but equally short periods, discharged the duties of the boys' governess.

Neither peasant nor "lady" left without some preliminary stirring scene.

But as Max sat drinking tea with Nico and Claire in the freshened and tidy room he saw that if the bear had not quite learnt to dance, he was considerably tamer. Nico's passion for Claire was at its height, and, had she been the *intriguante*

the duchess called her, she might even have induced him to marry her. But she had given herself to him as a free gift and did not dream of making conditions afterwards. It might have been better for herself had she possessed a coarser nature. Men like Ostrougoff always misjudge the women who are weak—or strong—enough to give them all unconditionally.

“I have just met two of your friends who send their love to you, Madame,” said Max, as he took a glass of tea from her hand.

“Who are they?” asked Claire eagerly.

“Miss Minnie and Lydia Vladimirovna.”

Claire smiled happily, and Nico laughed.

“Aha, the little English miss. She looks a baby, but I believed she was as starched as all Englishwomen are, with their continual ‘Oh, shocking!’ But she does n’t look like an Englishwoman. Has quite little teeth and is little herself, and her hair is n’t red.”

Some foreigners still persist in believing that all Englishmen wear check-suits and red whiskers and say “goddam,” and that all Englishwomen cry “Oh, shocking!” and have red hair and large, prominent teeth. Any solitary specimen of the race without these qualities is considered an exception to the general rule.

It was pleasantly warm in the dining-room, which gave on to a broad verandah, shaded in the hot weather by creepers and wild vines. It was

too far north for grapes, which grow so luxuriantly in the southern districts, but Nico raised the best melons in the district.

"It's pretty warm here," said Max—"do you still light the stoves?"

He put out his hand as he spoke and touched a funnel-like stove which was close to his chair, drawing it back with a sharp exclamation.

"Fine old heater, that!" chuckled Nico. "Of course you've heard the tale about it and my grandfather's cook."

"What tale?" asked Claire.

"Well, my grandfather was a peppery old gentleman and fond of good living. His cook knew it, and generally acted up to the knowledge; but he was careless sometimes, and once sent up such a wretched dinner when there was company that my grandfather, in a rage, sent for him and forced him to lick that stove with his tongue and listened to the frizzling and hissing with delight. *Zdorovâ!*"

"*Quelle horreur!*" shuddered Claire.

"I've heard the tale," said Max shortly.

"Yes, the old man was a type, there's no doubt about that," admitted Nico. "Claire, another glass. Don't look so horrified, my dove. I won't make any of our people lick the stove. They might make it hot for me afterwards, perhaps. They're not my serfs, you know."

Claire poured out the tea in silence.

“What’s going on up at the ‘Yellow Castle’?” Nico asked Max.

“Nothing particular, as far as I know. I don’t visit there any more.”

“So I heard. I congratulate you. Better give the *chudak* a wide berth. I say, tell me what really happened. I heard that Vladimir Vladimirovich flung a bottle at Petrusha and nearly killed him. Is it true?”

“What rot!” exclaimed Max vigorously. “Gortchnikoff did n’t like the idea of Petrusha being a Cossack, and naturally Petrusha was offended and left the house and I with him. That’s all.”

“What a *chudak!* Now if Korsakoff were the son of a merchant or a *mischanine* there would be some sense in it, but it’s considered rather fine to be even a simple Donskoi Cossack. They were never serfs, you know.”

“What does it matter whose son a man is if he’s a decent fellow himself?” demanded Max. “I’ve met an aristocrat or two of ancient lineage whom I longed to thrash but for fear of soiling my hands. At the University if a student talks about that sort of thing he’s counted a fool and a cad.”

“All the same I should n’t like to be anything but a *dvorianine*,” asserted Nico.

“Thank your stars you are one then,” laughed Max.

“How did you meet Lydia if you don’t go to the

'Yellow Castle'?" asked Claire, who had been following the conversation with difficulty.

"Vladimir Vladimirovich can't forbid me the steppe, Madame. I met her walking with Miss Minnie."

"I make Claire go out every day, wet or shine. It keeps her fresh. I've taught her to ride. Heavens! how she squeaked with fright at first! Now she's *molodetz!*"

With this high praise Nico smiled down upon Claire as he rose from the table, and as she rose and stood beside him, Max thought he had never seen so beautiful a pair. They might have posed as models for Day and Night. He—vivid, blond, superbly moulded; she—so softly dark, so roundly slender, with her cloudy hair and starry eyes. The shrinking dependence of her manner had slipped from her like a useless garment. In Nico's small kingdom she was queen, and the scathing scorn of the duchess or Mária Alexandrovna could not wound her royalty.

Nico rode half-way home with his guest and talked openly of his happiness.

"Isn't she a beauty?" he demanded. "She's worth all the town and country hussies I've ever met put together. Ach, *batoushka*, what a figure! Round and supple and firm. A waist that I can span, and little feet I can hold in the hollow of my hand. *Ey Boga*, I'm madly in love with her."

"If you want my frank opinion, take it. She's a hundred times too good for you."

Nico laughed confusedly. "Well, I don't say she is n't, though I know one or two decent women who would be glad enough to be in her shoes. And then, she loves me, Max."

"I know it. So much the worse for her."

"Don't get sour," laughed Nico. "Come now, I'm not such a brute after all. I've a devil of a temper sometimes, but it soon goes. And I've made her happy. She was miserable with that pig of a Gortchnikova."

Max did not answer. It was neither his province nor desire to preach to Nico. And the primitive man in him could not help judging it better that Claire should live and love and eventually suffer, than waste her beauty and her youth in servitude. And then he thought of another woman as young and nearly as pretty whose bright spirit was as yet unbroken by that same servitude, and vowed it never should be if she would give him the right to prevent it.

"Gortchnikoff refuses to let his land to the peasants, they say," he said to Nico, breaking the silence.

"Wh-at?" demanded Nico. "*Zdorovâ!* Why, they'll riot!"

"I wish the *Zemski* would interfere. But it seems there's no law to force a man to let his land. It's a shame. The peasants will starve."

"And riot," repeated Nico.

"Little Gortchnikoff cares for that. He'll lock himself up in his tower and grin down upon them shouting and throwing stones, and before they can burn him out, the police will gallop up and the peasants will be arrested, flogged, and send to Siberia."

"The police are a long way off," Nico reminded him. "Gortchnikoff is courting danger. I, for one, should n't be sorry for him if they burnt his 'Yellow Castle' over his mad head."

Though in Nico's opinion the ogre was risking his house and his life, he appeared to be perfectly unconscious of danger. The atmosphere of the "Yellow Castle" had brightened since the departure of Mária Alexandrovna, Marusia, and Fräulein. Vladimir Vladimirovich's long fit of gloom suddenly vanished, he came down to meals regularly enough, played chess with Minnie or Lydia, resumed his discussions with the former, teased Seraphima Profirovna and the parrot, and seemed altogether a different man.

The days passed quickly and pleasantly for Minnie and Lydia in undisturbed readings, discussions, music, walks, and chess. Seraphima Profirovna beguiled their leisure with endless tales of her youth, and Lydia's laughter began to be heard almost as frequently as Minnie's.

"You dear little thing," she said once to the English girl, "you have a talent to make people

feel more gay. I never saw papa in a such good temper for a so long time. How you are bright!"

"You must say, 'How bright you are!'" Minnie corrected demurely.

Lydia's birthday fell in the middle of March and Maria Alexandrovna announced her intention of returning home for a few days to celebrate the event *en famille*.

"She might just as well stay where she is," growled the ogre, as he read the letter. "We get on much better without her, don't we, Leda?"

And, in fact, when the lady arrived with Marusia and Fräulein, her mere presence darkened and charged the air with mutterings and thunder.

On the morning after the return of the wanderers, Minnie received a letter addressed in a handwriting utterly strange to her, and bearing the post-mark of the government town. Marusia, who had watched the distribution of the letters standing close by Minnie, whispered in her ear, "That letter is mine, Miss. Please give it to me when that mamma looks not, and say not anything about it."

Minnie put the letter down on the table. "Of course I shall say nothing about it," she replied, "but please don't use my name again."

"How you are unkind!" sighed Marusia. "But I knew you would not tell!"

She was looking much better again. The sunken cheeks were filled out and slightly coloured,

while a touch of animation brightened her whole appearance. She even gave promise of a certain attractiveness.

"I don't know what little plot she is carrying on," thought Minnie, "but I'm not going to spoil it. It would be a crime to push her back into her former dreadful state of listlessness. Besides, I am not Madame Gortchnikova's spy."

And so she kept the incident of the letter to herself.

CHAPTER III

“CHOOSE!”

“SHAMEFUL tablet!” exclaimed Maria Alexandrovna, tearing a sugar-encrusted “21” from a birthday cake sent by the Justice of the Peace to Lydia, and trampling it under her slippared feet. She was sitting in front of her dressing-table having her hair brushed, and Lydia had run in to bid her good-morning and show her the shamefully tableted cake.

“What is the matter with the tablet, mamma? It is very pretty.”

“It is shameful that you are twenty-one already and neither married nor engaged, and every one knows it.”

Lydia laughed merrily. She was in excellent spirits.

“I don’t feel so *shamefully* old, after all, mamma. Not every girl can expect to be married in her sixteenth year as you were.”

“If only you would get engaged,” protested her mother, slightly mollified, “but I am afraid you have some dreadful ideas in your head in spite of your feeling for Peter Petrovich. I met him

in town at a soirée and spoke to him. He was very nice, perfect in fact. It is nonsense about his not being a born *dvorianine*, nobody thinks much of that nowadays. Why, the vice-governor's sister is going to marry a simple Englishman, a sort of merchant who has a factory or something of that sort.”

This astonishing piece of news had already been communicated to Seraphima Profirovna, who could scarcely believe her ears, for the lady in question was of a family famous in the time of Ivan the Terrible.

“An Englishman—a simple Englishman—a plain Mr. Gray! Miss, is ‘Gray’ a good name?”

“Good enough,” admitted Minnie; “there was Lady Jane Gray, you know.”

Seraphima Profirovna did not know anything about that unfortunate lady, but she accepted Minnie's statement.

“But a manufacturer—a merchant! Heavens! Perhaps he's a lord's brother. These English are so queer that a merchant can be a lord's brother, can't he, miss?”

“He can, if he likes,” admitted Minnie. “That is, ‘a lord's brother’ can be a merchant, if he likes.”

“That must be it. He is a lord's brother.” And having decided that Mr. Gray was “a lord's brother,” Seraphima Profirovna contemplated the coming marriage with serenity.

No one would have been more amused at the position assigned to him than Mr. Gray himself.

Lydia carried her cake, shorn of the sugared numbers, into the dining-room, where Marusia, Minnie, and Fräulein were drinking coffee, while Seraphima Profirovna sat smoking in the chair sacred to herself.

“Now you are a woman grown,” was the old lady’s greeting to her favourite, “listen to the advice of an old maid. Don’t waste the best years of your life in celibacy but get married as soon as you can. It’s time.”

“And thou too, grandmamma!” exclaimed Lydia with almost Cæsarian reproach.

Vladimir Vladimirovich came down for the morning service in honour of his daughter’s coming of age. It was the first time the priest and the deacon had entered the house since the unfortunate New Year, and both went through the service with the utmost decorum, the deacon, standing by his superior beneath the Icon, not even sending a stray glance towards the *zakouska*, to which, however, he did ample justice afterwards.

When the clergy had driven away from the house, Vladimir Vladimirovich gave Lydia a beautiful pearl necklace. His gifts to his wife and daughters were always most costly, though he seemed desirous of depriving them of every opportunity to wear the jewels he gave with open hand.

Then he cleared his throat, looked round the table, and made a speech.

“ To-day, Leda, you are of age. I have not forgotten the promise I made to you two years ago. I never forget either my promises or my threats. I said that on your twenty-first birthday you should receive your own passport and an allowance of a hundred roubles a month. I gave the same to Marusia with the same conditions which I shall impose upon you. You are at perfect liberty to leave my house if you wish. But—understand this well—if you leave the protection of my roof to lead the independent life of a *cour-siste*, or anything of the sort, you leave it for ever. Your allowance shall be regularly paid to you,—no more and no less,—but I cannot and will not countenance you in such a mode of life. The world is a filthy bog, and if you step deliberately into it you must not return to your mother and sister. After lunch you shall come with me to town to receive your passport; your month’s allowance is in the casket with your pearls. Then choose between your home and the world. Choose ! ”

Lydia’s face clouded. Two years ago, after a dreadful scene between mother and daughter, Vladimir Vladimirovich had passed the sentence he repeated now. But Lydia had always hoped that the hard condition attached to her liberty would be removed. Though her home was by no means a happy one, the thought of leaving it in

disgrace, for ever, was very bitter, while the idea of complete liberty set every nerve in her body tingling with joy.

"Of course Leda will never be so heartless as to leave us," asserted Mária Alexandrova, "and you are entirely right, Vladimir. A young girl should stay with her family till her marriage. If Lydia wants to see something of life, it must be under my guidance."

"You are less fit for the world than Lydia herself," declared the ogre grimly. "I shall never forget the fiasco you made of your season in Petersburg. Why, I found you surrounded by charlatans and *demi-mondaines* whom you took for the cream of Society. Ha, ha! I always did say you are and always will be nothing but an *Instituteka*."

"Of course if you leave me to fight my way alone—" began Mária Alexandrovna pathetically.

"But I don't want you to fight your way. It is you who worry me to death till I let you go from sheer weariness. Oh, how I sympathise with Samson! Stay here and be quiet. You have every comfort, and a true woman's happiness lies in her home circle."

"But no one with our wealth and position stays all the year round in the country."

"So much the worse for them."

"If only you would let us keep open house—" And so the eternal dispute began again.

Lydia was trying to make her choice and found it very difficult. Evidently neither her father nor mother had a moment's doubt as to her course of action. They believed she would stay. She herself was not so sure. But then—to cut herself adrift from the entire family—to be free, free, free! And so the conflict continued.

After lunch Stepàn received an unpleasant surprise in the shape of an order from his master which he promptly carried out, and soon Lydia was driving to town with her father. When the girl held in her hands the magic paper which placed her life at her own disposal the conflict within her reached its climax. She was very silent during the drive home, and the ogre never took his cigar from his mouth. Suddenly what seemed to her a simple solution of the difficulty presented itself to her, and she determined to talk the matter over with her mother and induce her to ask Vladimir Vladimirovich's consent to the plan. It would perhaps have been better if she had addressed herself directly to her father, but she had been trained to regard him with awe, and had never opened a conversation with him in her life.

As it was a holiday, Minnie was free to go to her own room as early as she chose, and having letters to write she left the big house before eight o'clock and was soon deep in an inky chat with her far-away sister.

She was disturbed by a tap at the window, and

going into the corridor opened the door. It had begun to rain and the wind tore the door from her hand and slammed it violently, but it was re-opened from outside and Lydia entered and leant tremblingly against it.

“Leda, what is it?” cried Minnie. “Come into my room, it is draughty here.”

Lydia obeyed without a word, and sitting down on the bed let the hand-bag she was carrying slip to the floor and leaning her head against the rail wept with a restrained passion which shook her from head to foot.

Minnie sat quietly beside her till the stifled sobs died away in a childish catching of the breath, then she unfastened Lydia’s cloak and gently forced her to lie down. She lay still for a few minutes, her face gradually assuming even more than its usual calm, the quivering lips settling into a proud curve. Suddenly she sat up and reached for her cap and cloak. “Good-bye, Minnie,” she said, taking the other girl’s hand.

Minnie held the proffered hand in both her own. “Where are you going, Leda?” she asked quietly.

“To Petersburg; I must go at once to catch the train at Bielovka.”

“But it is ten *versts* away. You can’t walk that distance. It’s dark and raining.”

“Can’t I?” demanded Lydia, with a flash of her tear-brightened eyes.

“Leda, you are generally so splendidly self-controlled. Think what you are doing now. I do not ask for your confidence, but will you not regret having gone to such extremes?”

Lydia unclasped her cloak and flung it from her, undid the buttons of her velvet blouse, and faced Minnie in silence, with bared neck and shoulders, an angry flush mounting to the roots of her soft, dark hair.

“Oh!” was all Minnie said, but the word was almost a sob. On Leda’s breast and shoulders were the marks of heavy blows.

“I — I — told — her” — she could not say “mamma” — “that I wished very much to lead my own life, but as papa was so set against complete independence, I had thought of a good plan. Could n’t I live with Aunt Olga? That would not be ‘over-independence.’ ”

“It seems an excellent idea. Why should there be any objection to it?”

“As if I knew! Aunt Olga is the widow of a Petersburg advocate; she is not rich and her daughter is a *coursiste*. Mamma evidently thinks it criminal to be poor and a *coursiste*. But Aunt Olga is perfect, I think. Surely there is no earthly reason why I should not live with her. But *she* went mad, I think, screamed, scolded, and — and shook me, and when I wrenched myself free she did — this.”

She had told her story in gasps; but now proud

tears sprang to her eyes again; she refastened her blouse, picked up her cloak and bag, and turned to the door.

“I must go, it is getting late.”

“I will go with you,” said Minnie briefly.

“Please don’t, dear. They will be sure to send over to look for me and if they find us both gone they will send to the station to look for us. And I cannot bear another scene.”

“But if they find me alone——”

“They will think I have locked myself up in one of the tower-rooms. I have done so before. Good-bye. We have had some nice days together lately. I will write to you. Good-bye.”

“I don’t like letting you go like this, in the rain and the dark, alone.”

Lydia almost smiled. “You would be such a protection, would n’t you?—you dear little thing. I will take Boyarin. He will fly at the throat of any one who dares to molest me. But there is no danger, and the road is straight as an arrow all the way.”

“But you have no goloshes. You will catch your death of cold. Take my *valinkie*.”

But Minnie’s miniature high boots were too small for Lydia.

“Stay here till to-morrow morning, at least. Sleep with me.”

“I cannot—I cannot,” said Lydia with a catch in her voice. “They will look for me and I can-

not bear another scene, I really cannot, my nerve seems all gone.”

She was already pulling at the door. “Good-bye, good-bye, dear,” she repeated, and the next minute Minnie stood alone in the corridor.

She had scarcely returned to her room, where she sat irresolutely staring at her unfinished letter, and wondering if she had done right in letting Lydia go, when there was another tap at the window and she rose to let in Fräulein.

All thought of betraying Lydia’s flight vanished at the sight of the German’s important and pleasantly excited face.

“Is Lydia Vladimirovna here?” she demanded, coming into Minnie’s room and glancing round it with her beady eyes, remarking the open letter and Minnie’s indifferent air.

“She is not here, you see.”

Fräulein pushed her inquiries no farther and returned to the house with her report.

“Of course,” sobbed Maria Alexandrovna, “she is hiding in one of the tower-rooms. She always does when I have offended her. I own I went too far this time, but understand and sympathise with the feelings of a mother!”

This was ambiguous, but Fräulein declared that she both understood and sympathised, and bathed her mistress’s head with Eau de Cologne.

But when, later on, Maria Alexandrovna went into her daughter’s room and found that the girl

had not come to bed, she was really alarmed, and rang for her husband. The unusual lateness of the summons roused the ogre into descending to inquire into the cause. Maria Alexandrovna was incapable of explanation, but Fräulein told of Lydia's disappearance, saying nothing of the cause.

Vladimir Vladimirovich's rage and anxiety were terrible. He sent to the station, but when news was brought to him that Lydia had left for town that night and that young Galovkine had seen her off, his anxiety was swallowed up in rage.

"That young Galovkine—that young Galovkine—" he stammered. The rest was inarticulate.

CHAPTER IV

FAREWELL, YE TOWERS!

MAX had been a very innocent participator in Lydia's flight. He was driving homewards from the station where he had just met the goods train and received some parcels, when a voice called to him out of the darkness,—“Max! Stop, please.”

The red lamps of his *droschkie* shed a very small, dim circle of light upon the road, along which his horse could have passed safely in a state of somnambulism, so familiar was it, and the woman who had called him—the voice betrayed the sex but not the identity—stood in the shadow.

“Who are you? What do you want?” asked Max, pulling up.

A cloaked figure, one hand on the collar of the dog beside it, emerged from the darkness and came close to the *droschkie*.

“Lydia Vladimirovna! What in heaven's name are you doing here?”

“Drive me to the station, please, Max Ardilionovich. I am so tired,” said Lydia in a voice so

unlike her usual decisive tones that Max was not surprised he had not recognised it at first.

Silently he helped her to a seat beside him. The old horse moved on leisurely of its own accord.

"Turn back, please," said Lydia, "or I shall miss my train."

"I think the best thing I can do is to take you straight back home," declared Max perplexedly. "It's a good thing I came to the station myself instead of sending Ivan."

Lydia laid her hand on his arm. "Have you ever known me lose my self-control for trifles, or do wild things from mere impulse?" she asked him earnestly. "When we were children you used to call me Princess Deliberation. I deserve the name still. I must catch the half-past ten train. If you won't drive me I shall get out and walk. I shall be in time after all, if I hurry. But I will *not* go home. I am twenty-one to-day, and have my passport, my allowance, and my liberty."

"Then why go off in this clandestine way?"

"I cannot tell you. But I have good reasons. I thought I could trust you, Max. I thought you knew me well enough to know that I would not act so without good reason. When I heard wheels I kept to the side of the road, and was so glad when I saw your face in the lamplight. I felt sure you would give me a lift, but as you won't, good-bye."

She laid her hand on the reins to bring Jhélaniya

to a standstill, but Max recovered them and turned the horse round.

Jhélaniya (The Desired One) was very much put out by this unaccountable manoeuvre. To be half-way home to oats and litter, and then to be faced round again! It was sheer tyranny on the part of the creature Man, and The Desired One hung her head, sulked, and moved as leisurely as possible.

Max did not try to make her quicken her pace. The station would be reached in time, and it was better to linger on the road than to wait about at Bielovka, attracting the gaze of the curious. He knew enough of Lydia to feel sure that the cause of her flight was serious, and, indeed, he came very near the truth, though he laid the blame on Vladimir Vladimirovich, concluding that the latter's incipient madness had taken a dangerous turn.

"I always thought it would come to that some day," he thought. Aloud he said, "Where are you going, Lydia Vladimirovna?"

"To Petersburg, to Aunt Olga's."

"That's a good idea," observed Max with fatherly approval. "And you'll look Vèra up, of course. Do you know her address?"

"No, give it me, please."

Max did so and began to talk about Petersburg as if there were nothing extraordinary in Lydia's hurried journey there. But his calm was more than half assumed.

"She is wet and cold and tired to death, poor child!" he was thinking. "And I suppose the ogre has passed all bounds—beaten her, most likely. The brute! If Vèra were home I'd take her back with me, but I suppose I should only make matters worse if I did so now. It would be all over the district in a week's time with heaven knows what accumulated lies. Even in the steppe one can't get quite free from Princess Mária Alexiévna."

The Russian Mrs. Grundy is ennobled, but nearly as spiteful as her English cousin.

At Bielovka he left Lydia outside in the *droschkie* and entered the shed-like half-station, where the general factotum, who was station- and post-master and clerk in one, sat alone in the tiny ticket-office in all the glory of a gold-braided hat, drinking the everlasting glass of tea, and lemon.

"Back again, Maximilian Ardilionovich?" demanded this important personage.

"Give me a glass of *vodka*, Ivan Ivanovich," said Max.

The triple potentate opened a little cupboard in the wall, disclosing packets of tea and sugar and a collection of lemons, together with a glass or two and a bottle of the required spirit.

"Feel queer?" he asked Max as he handed him a tumbler half-full of *vodka*.

"It's not for myself," asserted Max walking

off, leaving the potentate to resume his potations.

"Take a sip or two of this," he advised Lydia, returning to her. "It will prevent you from catching cold, and mind you take some refreshment at the first stopping-place."

Lydia forced herself to drink a little of the warming spirit, and Max took the rest of it back to Ivan Ivanovich and bought the only available ticket—to the next station. Passengers bound on longer journeys were obliged to book again at the district town.

There was happily not a soul in the place save the general factotum and the one porter, and only a couple of peasants descended from the train as it stopped. But they looked curiously at Lydia, and as she passed one of them whispered audibly, "The wizard's daughter—*ey Boga!*"

For the first time in her life Lydia travelled second-class. "Perhaps I really ought to go third," she said to Max. "I have not much money, you know. That hundred roubles must last a whole month."

She had not the slightest idea as to the relative value of money; her mother having never allowed her to buy even a pair of gloves for herself. At the very outset of her journey her ignorance of the smallest practical details of life came upon her with a sense of angry helplessness.

"It is high time I went into the world,"

she thought. "I shall soon learn to adapt myself."

Boyarin howled on the platform as she stepped into the train.

"Good-bye, Max," she said. "Take Boyarin back with you, don't let him run after the train. I am glad I met you. It does n't seem so cold."

"Now remember what I told you," Max exhorted her. "Go straight to the Central Hotel on your arrival in town and take the express train to Moscow. It does n't start before six in the evening so that you 'll have time for a good rest, and don't take any earlier train for you 'll only be twice as long on the road if you do. At Moscow you must wait five hours for the express to Petersburg. Good-bye."

The train moved leisurely out of the station and Max, returning to the tethered Desired One, left the potentate to regret that the excitement incident to an elopement would not enliven the dulness of Bielovka.

On the homeward journey Max left Jhélaniya entirely to her own sweet will. As he reached that part of the bank which was opposite Gortchnikoff's park, he glanced across the now impassable river to where Minnie's light still shone above the steps.

"Still awake!" he thought. "I suppose she will leave the 'Yellow Castle' to-morrow. They

will suspect her of abetting Lydia's flight. I must keep a lookout at the station."

He was correct in one of his surmises at least. Minnie was dismissed from the "Yellow Castle" next day but not for screening Lydia's escape. After Fräulein's report, Mária Alexandrovna did not suspect her of having anything to do with it. The reasons for the dismissal of the now unnecessary English teacher were of a quite practical nature. Mária Alexandrovna was resolved upon a speedy return to town with Marusia and Fräulein, and naturally enough did not wish to leave Minnie at the "Yellow Castle" to give Vladimir Vladimirovich practice in English.

According to the terms of her engagement, if dismissed suddenly Minnie had a right to three months' extra salary; if she left of her own accord within a year she forfeited a fourth of the salary due to her.

"I must say," admitted Madame Gortchnikova, "that I am enough content with you, Miss. You are not enough respectuous, perhaps, but one cannot expect everything. I was, however, much destroyed on hearing from Fräulein that you meeted young Galovkine in the river on occasional times. I had the wish to make my remarks to you on the cause of it, but first I said Fräulein to watch and she told that you met no more when the ice was broked. It is well, for I wish not two of my governesses to go the same road."

"You need not feel concerned on my account, Madame Gortchnikova," Minnie assured her coldly, as she left the room to make the necessary preparations for her departure.

First of all she took stock of her small fortune. She had not touched the salary she had received monthly since her arrival, as her repaid fare had more than sufficed for the few trifling expenses she had incurred during her four months' stay at the "Yellow Castle," so that with the extra three months' salary she had a clear two hundred and forty-five roubles in hand, besides an extra twenty-five for the return journey. She determined to go to Petersburg, take a room for a time at the Governesses' Home, and look out for a *demi-place*, which is an engagement the terms of which are generally easy and advantageous to both parties, the teacher receiving board and lodging in return for a lesson of an hour or two, while for the rest of the time he or she is, as the Russians say, "a free Cossack." If one has sufficient money in hand to wait till other lessons are obtained, or to tide over a slack time, the *demi-place* is the least objectionable way of earning one's living as tutor or governess.

Max knew that Mária Alexandrovna never sent her departing governesses into town, but merely lent them the most tumble-down equipage in the coach-house to drive to Bielovka, though by this arrangement they could only go by the slowest trains as only those stopped at the half-station.

He therefore determined to be at Bielovka in the evening.

Minnie only left her room for dinner, which dragged through heavily. Maria Alexandrovna kept her room, Vladimir Vladimirovich had been invisible all day, Marusia seemed nervous, and Seraphima Profirovna was so utterly demoralised by grief that she sat quite close to the table, let her hands touch the cloth, and openly wiped away an occasional tear with the back of her hand.

"Pour me out another glass of *vodka*, Efime *galoobchick*," she said, "it will make me sleep and forget my grief. Oh, sorrow, my sorrow! Holy Virgin, Queen of Heaven!"

It was from this eccentric old lady, at whose oddities she had so often laughed, that Minnie heard the only kindly parting words that cheered her exit from the "Yellow Castle."

"God give you all good, my dove!" She made the sign of the cross over Minnie—from a safe distance. "It's a pity you're going. Leda liked you. She must come back, or I will rejoice no more. God give you all good!"

She made the sign of the cross again.

Minnie ran down the slippery, wet steps and got into the *droschky*, while Efime quarrelled with Stepán about the arrangement of the trunk. At length it was settled to the satisfaction of both, and Minnie was driven away, leaving Efime, almost surprised into a smile at the receipt of a handsome

tip, staring after her and shouting, "God give you health, *barishna*."

Once in the road she turned for a last look at the house which had been her home for the last four months.

"So it's good-bye to the 'Yellow Castle,'" she thought. "I shall never see it again. That's another finished chapter in my life."

She could not understand why her eyes were dim. Surely she should feel no regret at leaving those who had dismissed her so lightly.

Yet once again she turned to look at the slowly receding towers, and each turn of the wheels seemed in some strange manner to be crushing her heart.

CHAPTER V

A WOMAN'S "NO"

"HOW lucky!" exclaimed Max in hypocritical surprise, as he met Minnie at the half-station. "We shall be travelling together again. I'm going up to town to see Korsakoff. Those your traps? Sit down and don't bother about them. There's heaps of time before the train comes in and they can't be checked here, you know."

Minnie's despondency vanished like smoke in clear air; of course it had been caused by the chill loneliness of her departure, but on meeting an old acquaintance to cheer her on her way the distant road seemed less gloomy.

Max had decided to go up to town with her. It is next to impossible to make a proposal of marriage while waiting for a train in a shed of a half-station, where one is the observed of all observers, even if the latter are only a general factotum, a porter, and one or two loafing peasants.

The journey would give him opportunities for fourteen consecutive hours.

Yet at ten o'clock the next morning, as he

sat at breakfast with Minnie at one of the many stopping places in the leisurely journey, the momentous question had not been put. No suitable opportunity for leading up to the subject of marriage had presented itself. First had come the business of re-booking and checking the baggage at the district town, between which and the next station a number of passengers had rendered anything approaching confidential conversation impossible; and to have recourse to French in such an emergency is indiscreet in Russia, where your neighbour, for aught you know, may understand every European language and a few Eastern ones. Then they had had supper, and no man—unless he be a German—can wax sentimental over veal-cutlets and beer; and on returning to the train, Minnie, declaring herself sleepy, had gone to the ladies' coupé for the night.

“I have only two hours left,” thought Max desperately, as a gorgeously uniformed official strolled into the refreshment room with a bell, and causing it to clang hideously, shouted amid the reverberations of the ringing, “Train for——” running the names of several stations one into the other, and thus producing a medley of sound as incomprehensible as the heart of railway official could desire.

Max looked at his watch. “It is, presumably, our train,” he said, and led the way in search of convenient seats.

There were not many passengers, so that, as at their first meeting, they were soon settled in a secluded corner of the second-class compartment; and when the conductor, having vigorously scrutinised and punched all the tickets and peered beneath all the divans, departed to worry the third class, Max felt that the time had come to speak out like a man.

"I believe," he said, "that our presiding genius must be a Spirit of Steam. It seems quite in the natural order of things for me to travel with you."

"I must own that you are a desired voyage comrade," admitted Minnie. "Thou art truly jolly."

"I should like to travel with you all my life."

From sheer excess of nervousness, Max's tone was so ultra calm that Minnie understood merely the letter of his words.

"It would be rather annoying at last," she laughed.

Max condemned his "idiotic idea" of proposing in a stuffy railway carriage. Oh, for the spring air, clear skies, and green of the steppe! There, words would have come to him free as the flow of the river, fresh as the rush of the wind. In this jolting box he could only blunder out halting and stupid phrases. But it was his last chance; it would be even more embarrassing at a crowded station.

He gathered up his courage with both hands,

but just then—Heaven only knows why—the prowling conductor put in an appearance, looking suspiciously at the racks, and when he was gone Minnie led the conversation to Lydia, Vèra, St. Petersburg, and the life she meant to lead there. The sight of the town darkening the distant horizon spurred Max on to another effort.

“Why should you go to Petersburg at all?” he asked. “At least I suppose you may just as well go there so as to be with Vèra for a time, as it is Lent, and no one is allowed to marry now—” Here Minnie’s eyes opened wide in amused astonishment. “What I mean to say is—why take a place at all? You need n’t, you know, if you marry me.”

She was still looking at him with bewildered amusement, but at his last words and their unmistakable import, a change passed over her face. Perplexity, pain, wistfulness he read in her candid eyes before the fringed lids drooped and veiled their swift variety of expression.

“Will you marry me? Will you?” he repeated. “I love you so strongly.”

Such an ordinary Russian expression—“I love you so *strongly*,”—but his voice made the suggestion of strength seem very apt.

The door opened squeakily. “Tickets for X—, *ghospoda*,” chanted the ubiquitous conductor.

Max was a particularly even-tempered young

man, but only regard for Minnie prevented him from cursing that conductor to his face. As it was he "thoued" him, though he generally used the second person plural to every one outside his own household except peasants and *istvoitchickie*, who would be most astonished—and probably chilled—at being addressed as "you."

As the man went on his collecting way, Max turned to Minnie. "Everything is against me to-day," he said, "and I was never very eloquent. But if you marry me, you will see how I love you, although I can't tell you so properly."

Minnie gave him a fleeting glance which puzzled him when he contrasted it with the words which followed. "I can't—really. No—it is quite impossible. You see—I—I—am not the sort of woman who can love more than once. It can't be."

If he had only understood the hurt perplexity in her voice.

"So you love some one else," he said quietly.

She neither assented nor denied, unless silence indeed means assent. Max took it in this way as he too sat silent, overwhelmed with a sudden, bitter sense of horrible loneliness. He had thought that he and she were to be life-comrades, but to her, apparently, he had only been a passer-by!

Her eyes looked as though they had never harboured laughter, so hauntingly sad were they. They were gazing back across five years to a

summer day when her brother and her lover—trusting themselves to the traitorous Black Sea—vivid azure beneath azure skies—had been caught in their frail boat by a sudden, fierce, southern squall, and sank to everlasting sleep beneath those blue, deceptive waves.

The train was slackening its already leisurely pace in anticipation of the station before Max broke the silence.

“Don’t let what I have said interfere with your friendship for Vèra. You will need friends in a strange city. Promise me you will go to her.”

“I promise I will go to her,” repeated Minnie.

The train drew up. There was the usual bustle of porters with luggage, and soon they were driving different ways, she to the hotel to await the Moscow express, and he to Korsakoff’s.

One of his brusque gusts of passion shook Petrusha at the news of Lydia’s flight. He wanted to start off immediately in pursuit of her, or lodge a complaint against Gortchnikoff as a dangerous madman—anything rather than let things quietly take their course. Even Max, who knew this usually shy young man better than any one else, was stricken into wondering silence for a time.

“Let me remind you,” he said at length, “that there is really no proof against Vladimir Vladimirovich.”

“Proof?” echoed Petrusha, “and she was forced

to rush out into the wet night and walk ten versts across the steppe rather than remain in the same house with him. That's proof enough, I take it. My poor, brave girl!"

"Perhaps Mária Alexandrovna was to blame," suggested Max, hesitatingly.

"What nonsense! Mária Alexandrovna is very nervous and unhappy. What woman would n't be after more than twenty years of life with that madman? But she adores her children."

"Some women, especially 'nervous' ones, have queer ideas of love,—seem to think it merely a right of tyranny," objected Max. "And from something I heard, I'm inclined to reserve my judgment of Gortchnikoff."

In fact, though Minnie had naturally kept silence as to the actual cause of Lydia's flight, she had given Max to understand that his condemnation of Vladimir Vladimirovich was unjust.

"I also ask you to remember," he went on, "that Lydia Vladimirovna is going to friends; that she has her passport, and an allowance, the half of which—earned with difficulty—suffices to keep many girls as refined and more delicate than herself."

There was a note of impatience in his voice. He was thinking of another girl whose incomprehensible lover allowed her to fight her way alone in a foreign country.

"I have heard," he thought, "that English

lovers are often placidly engaged for years and years, waiting till they can put a better sort of chairs and tables into a larger house than they could afford at first. Queer love! The horrible *bourgeoisie* of it all! And she—so utterly unworldly—so sunny. Who can the man be? Some merchant or merchant's clerk in Odessa, I suppose. Error, error! That is not her sphere—she is made for the fresh air—a changeling—in winter an elf of the whirling snow—in spring the spring itself embodied.”

“You think,” inquired Petrusha, “that Gortch-nikoff won't cut off her allowance?”

“What allowance?” demanded Max, suddenly recalled from his meditations. “Oh—Lydia Vladimirovna's. No. I don't think he will. It was promised unconditionally.”

Petrusha lit a cigarette—a sign of returning calm.

“Perhaps,” he mused aloud, “I had better not go to Petersburg just yet. She has the liberty she has wanted so long. Let her find out what it is worth. Let her find her own level in the ‘world’ she is so anxious to enter. She will find that, except for the few called to greatness, that ‘world’ is simply a number of sections, each divided from the other by an almost impassable barrier. She has got out of her first section, and she will feel lost till she gets into another. She is not of a stature to step over the barriers. She

will not own to feeling lost, at first, but sooner or later she will face the truth, and then my time will come."

Max spent two days with his friend, and then returned to his quiet house. In his study memories of Minnie persistently haunted him. The piano seemed to be waiting for her, her accustomed seat on the divan looked almost consciously vacant, the air was so still as to suggest expectancy of her laugh and her mirth-provoking Russian.

Shadows crept from the windows across the polished floor, the swift twilight darkened into night. In the stillness the crushed, yet obstinate hope in Max's heart made itself heard. That good-bye at the station was not their farewell. She would come back—come back to her home where the very shadows waited for her,—come back to the fate she had been led across many lands to lose and to find again.

"The steward is waiting in the hall, and supper is ready in the dining-room, Maximilian Ardilionovich," said Stepan from the doorway. "And what was my old woman thinking of not to light the lamp here? Forgive her, your Nobleness, she is getting old."

CHAPTER VI

INDEPENDENCE

LYDIA'S new life seemed to the girl herself to be a continual stumbling against and overcoming of difficulties, all the more annoying because of their pettiness. Her education had tended to the destruction of all independence of thought and action, and though she had rebelled against it since her childhood it had left its traces. It seemed strange to her at first to be obliged to do everything for herself; she was awkward and slow at dressing her hair, continually losing buttons, seemed to have no decent stockings, and was horrified at the swift destruction of binding and braid. She had always resented Fräulein turning over her drawers, declaring that she tidied them herself; but now she discovered there was more to be done than keeping things in their place. Her allowance of ten pounds a month, which she had dreamt of as the means of delightful independence, was inadequate in her inexperienced hands. There was no room for her in her aunt's dainty but tiny apartment, and she rented one on the floor below for twenty-five roubles a month;

another twenty-five went to Aunt Olga for board, and the remaining fifty in the first month simply took to themselves wings and flew away, without leaving any substantial trace behind. A popular book, a dainty piece of furniture to brighten her rather stiff room, a *droschkie* here and there, a seat at the theatre, a piece of music, a pretty *fichu* which caught her fancy and was only one rouble twenty-five,—a few more such trifles, and Lydia found herself almost kopeckless before half the month was over.

When she came to know girls earning thirty roubles a month, and living on it, she felt bitterly ashamed of her own helplessness.

She had telegraphed home on her arrival at Aunt Olga's, and a few days later received a characteristic letter from her mother,—eight pages of excuses and upbraidings, condemnation of unfilial conduct, and self-justification.

“Your father is deeply incensed,” Maria Alexandrovna concluded. “He declares you shall never re-enter the house as long as he lives, and has forbidden me to write to you. But what will a mother not dare, even for a child who has wilfully broken her heart?”

A little later—a sign of her actual dismissal from her father's house—Lydia received three great boxes containing all her personal property. Vladimir Vladimirovich had superintended the packing of the trunks himself, declaring that

nothing belonging to his rebellious daughter should remain in the house.

Lydia did better the second month as far as the practical details of her life were concerned, but she could not as yet adapt herself to the society she had entered. Her cousin Olga was a *coursiste*, a soft-faced, baby-featured, short-haired girl, whose brown eyes shot strange, swift glances through round spectacles, whose dress was careless but not altogether tasteless, and whose character was the strangest blend imaginable. She went over the accounts with the cook in the morning, severely disputing each doubtful item, and attended socialistic meetings in the evening. Her friends were all more or less like herself,—*coursistes* and students who discussed any earthly or unearthly subject with a fine flow of glib scientific words, who hated with superb hatred anything approaching "bourgeoisism" or "aristocratism," to whom the desire of personal happiness seemed unworthy egoism, yet who sometimes snatched at a passing pleasure with half-disdainful eagerness. Among them Lydia felt like an alien endeavouring to understand an unknown tongue.

"She is refreshing," declared a student once to Olga; "one welcomes a change sometimes, you know."

"Change?" echoed another. "She reminds me rather of my grandmother who was con-

sidered terribly learned and advanced for her day."

"She is a still green reincarnation of Madame de Sévigné," said a decadent-looking *coursiste*, quietly, and every one felt that Lydia had been fitly classified. Thenceforth she was referred to as De Sévigné.

When Minnie, shortly after her arrival in St. Petersburg, looked up her late pupil and called upon her one morning as she was writing the "impressions" which had taken the place of the discarded diary, Lydia was surprised at the intensity of her own joy at the meeting.

Minnie perched herself on the edge of the lounging chair which had contributed to the untimely vanishing of Lydia's allowance, and took a critical look round the room.

"You have arranged it very nicely," was her verdict. "I have been told that my talent for making a pleasant abode out of lodgings is something wonderful, but you have beaten me."

"But I spent so much money on these *bagatelles*," admitted Lydia, ruefully. "It reminds me of the reply given by an officer to his orderly when the latter asked for money on going to market, 'Any fool can buy provisions with money.' You arranged yourself so nicely in our old pavilion without spending a kopeck."

Minnie had scrupulously followed out the programme she had set for herself on leaving the

“Yellow Castle.” Advertisements and visits to agencies had had the desired result, and she was settled in a “demi-place,” where, except for the daily two hours devoted to the arduous task of correcting the fearful English accent of a lanky lad of fourteen, she was her own mistress. Other lessons were harder to find than she had imagined, and her chief occupation at present was an obstinate grapple with the bristling difficulties of the Russian grammar.

Faithful to her promise to Max, and following her own inclination, she kept up her acquaintance with Vèra, and it soon deepened into friendship. Vèra scarcely ever spoke of herself—her own existence seemed to be merged in the deep current of life in general; but an incident that occurred during one of her walks with Minnie gave an opening for more intimate intercourse.

They were passing through the central alley of the Summer Gardens, threading their way quickly through the crowd of idle saunterers, when an officer—not slim enough for the typical lieutenant and not important enough for the typical colonel,—walking with a strikingly dressed lady, saluted Vèra with irreproachable correctness, raising his white-gloved hand to his red-banded cap and bending gracefully from the waist. Vèra replied with the merest inclination of her small, well-poised head.

“That is my husband,” she said to Minnie, as

they passed on. "The sight of him does not give me pain now, not even one thrill of regret. I feel absolutely nothing, and yet once—six years ago—I imagined that I loved him passionately. There is nothing so foolish as a young girl's dreams!"

"Then you believe that love is foolishness?"

Vèra shrugged her shoulders slightly. "I don't believe in it at all. It is a sensation grossly exaggerated by poets and novelists, a matter of nerves and temperament which, uncontrolled, drives undisciplined and uncultured natures into a kind of temporary madness. It has been falsely glorified as the noblest passion—it is the lowest."

"When a woman feels that her life is a blank without a certain man, that his mere presence changes a senseless routine into a full existence—ah, I cannot express myself well in Russian—but that sensation of *completeness* near him, of loss in his absence,—that is love, I suppose, the love that demands *la vie à deux*. It is quite natural and simple. I can't see why you and Tolstoi——"

"Thanks for the linking of our names," laughed Vèra.

"Why you rave against it as if it were something degrading and purely animal. That cannot be just. Because, if it were so, the feeling could be awakened by *le premier venu*."

"For some happy natures love may be a perfect understanding, a comradeship illumined by swift

flashes of passion too spontaneous to be other than pure," admitted Vèra. "But for others, passion is degradation. *Que voulez-vous?* We must see with our own eyes, and each of us has peculiarities of vision."

One evening as Minnie sat alone in her room, translating a Siberian tale of Korolenko's, Vèra came in and said with calm exasperation: "Our Institute is closed by order of the Minister of Public Instruction."

Minnie pushed back her papers, rumped up her hair, and asked for particulars.

"The government would like to close it altogether; the Minister imagines the Women's Medical Institute to be a hotbed of sedition. All the students' risings can be traced to our influence, he says. Of course, it's nonsense. Have you heard the latest of his *bêtises*? The students are forbidden to sing *Gaudeamus*; and now even those who have no more voice than a crow sing or whistle it on every possible occasion. At a students' concert the other night it was sung three times with unusual *verve*."

"Naturally," admitted Minnie. "But why is your Institute closed? Have you been singing *Gaudeamus*?"

"The Minister issued new and very severe regulations for the forthcoming examinations. Of course we fell into the trap and protested, which was just what he wanted. Our protest was re-

garded as rebellion, and the Institute is closed. That means another year lost, and probably the same thing will happen next year. Think what it means! Most of the *coursistes* are poor, and have chosen their profession as a means of gaining a livelihood. I'm not rich myself, but I have my share of Bielovka, and can live there. I study medicine for its own sake, in order to be able to help our people down there. The district doctor has far too much on his hands, and lives miles away. The peasants apply to their 'wise woman,' and her remedies are often worse than the disease. For instance, if her patient has sore eyes, she rubs them with charmed dung or other filth. In papa's time a favourite 'cure' for fever in the winter was to break two holes in the river-ice, put the patient in at one and drag him out at the other. It was kill or cure, generally the former."

"But they know better than that now, I hope," said Minnie.

"They do things almost as bad. I expected to get my degree this year, and now—that wretched Minister! One might imagine he was longing to be shot, like his predecessor."

"What will you do now?" asked Minnie.

"Go home for the summer, and to Berne next term. Even if I don't get a Russian degree, I shall gain the necessary knowledge. I want you to come with me; not to Berne, of course, but to Bielovka."

Minnie flushed to her curls. "I can't," she said.

"Why not, pray? You are not bound to your present place, and are in no need of money at present. Of course you can come."

Minnie was pale now. "I *can't*," she repeated, desperately.

"H-um!" said Vèra, scrutinising the averted face; "you have quarrelled with Max, I suppose."

Minnie faced her tormentor calmly. "Nothing of the kind," she protested.

"Then come home with me," insisted Vèra.

Minnie heaved a sigh of longing. "I should love to! How fresh the steppe must be now! And the space! Here it is all houses, islands, and pine-woods. But I can't," she repeated with reluctant decision.

"You know best of course," admitted Vèra. "But it's a pity. It is beginning to be dreadfully stuffy here, and in a few weeks it will be unbearable. You are not looking yourself, either. Peter does n't agree with you. Still, if you *will* stick here, what can I do? I can't bear travelling alone," she added innocently, after a pause. "I shall telegraph to Max to come and fetch me."

"Vèra," flashed Minnie, "I know you know."

"Yes, I know. Why did you refuse him, Minnie? Don't answer if you find my question impertinent, but I love you both, and it seems to me you might be happy."

"But you don't believe in love," Minnie reminded her with an unsteady laugh.

"I spoke for myself alone. Two such wholesome specimens of the race as you and Max simply ought to marry. You are so evidently suited to each other. Of course I am unpardonably meddling, but what more do you expect from life? Do you want to be teacher and translator all your days? In half-a-dozen years you 'll be sick of it. You are one of those women who are fated to marry, or are unhappy if they don't."

"*Grand merci*," flashed Minnie. "Vèra, I will never forgive you if you send for Max—" she added hurriedly—"imillian Ardilionovich,—and I will not see him if he comes."

CHAPTER VII

"MY DAUGHTER"

THE spring thaw had begun in St. Petersburg when Minnie first saw it, and her first impression was far from favourable. Then came damp, stuffy days and cold nights, and she marvelled at her homesick longing for the wind-swept steppe.

It was fairer than ever now, green under blue skies, and divided by the broad, slowly flowing river, with the tower of the "Yellow Castle" standing out, and clearly to be seen for miles around. Vladimir Vladimirovich sat for hours, smoking cigar after cigar, and looking from the turret window, wearied to death with solitude and dulness, but not deigning to admit it even to himself.

Downstairs Seraphima Profirovna poured endless lamentations into the patient ears of Akulina; the parrot screamed "*Dourak*" across the stillness of the hall, the dust accumulated on the ledges of the locked doors, in the folds of the *portières*, in the passages, and in the dining-room, which lacked

even the indifferent care of the resigned Efime, who had been literally kicked out of the house by his master.

“If only Vladimir would let the windows be opened,” sighed Seraphima Profirovna; “it is the middle of April and as stuffy and dull as in the tomb. Yes, bring in the soup. I must eat, though I’m tired of dining alone. It’s useless to send Vania up to the tower to call Vladimir, he will only send him to the devil.”

Vania, Akulina’s son, a curly-haired, clumsy lad of fifteen, had been pressed into service in place of Efime, and sometimes, treading delicately and holding his breath, managed to wait without smashing a glass or two, or spilling the soup or sauce. He wore the white gloves which had served the succession of footmen, which, being several sizes too large for him, made him more clumsy than ever, but Seraphima Profirovna would never have accepted anything from any one’s ungloved hands.

As Vania brought in the soup, she rose with a sigh from her crimson seat, and walked round the table to where her own special dining-room chair stood facing the wall as if in disgrace. Pushing it with feet and elbows, she managed to get it into position, and with another sigh sat down half a foot from the table to attack her soup. As she was conveying the third spoonful to her mouth she suddenly stopped short and sat stock still,

elbows extended and raised, mouth open, eyes fixed upon the door.

"Vladimir is coming," she breathed.

The ogre entered gloomily, and, by way of greeting, grumbled at Seraphima Profirovna and swore at Vania for failing to call him to dinner.

"Am I not to dine in my own house?" he demanded tragically, as he sat down.

"But *Voloda*, yesterday evening you told Vania to go and hang himself and not bother you," protested the old lady plaintively, "and I thought——"

"You thought starvation would be a fitting death for me, I suppose," finished the ogre, grimly. "You—Vania—are to call me every day for lunch and dinner. Whether I come or not is nothing to do with you—you striped idiot!" (Russians only know why they suppose an idiot to be striped.) "Understand?"

The last word rose to a bellow, which so startled the striped idiot that he tripped over his own feet and narrowly escaped measuring his length upon the polished floor.

However, as dinner progressed, Vladimir Vladimirovich's temper improved. Under the influence of champagne he became jovially talkative. Seraphima Profirovna dared to complain of dulness, and as her nephew's geniality increased even expressed her bitter regret at Lydia's absence.

The cloud descended, darker than ever, upon the ogre's brow.

“Aunt—don't dare to mention that young person's name before me. She is not my daughter. She ran away from this house in an indecent and clandestine manner, and as long as I am master here she shall never re-enter it.”

“You are cruelly hard upon the poor child,” exclaimed Seraphima Profirovna, driven to desperation by long weeks of loneliness and mourning for her favourite. “Of course she was beside herself, and no wonder! No grown *barishna* can put up with being beaten like a serf, or a dog, or a peasant's wife. You would n't have stood it yourself in your young days. Your father was pretty free with his whip and his fists, and hasty, but he never laid a finger on you after you were twelve years old.”

“What are you raving about?” demanded Vladimir Vladimirovich, angrily. “Beaten? Lydia? I'm a *chudak*, I know, but I'm not a brute; and though I may have shaken Mária sometimes—and Heaven knows she's provoking enough to rouse the devil in an archangel—I've never struck her nor my daughters. You are growing silly, Seraphima Profirovna, silly from old age.”

“I've all my faculties, praise be to God,” drawled Seraphima Profirovna, huffily, “and I'll thank you, Vladimir, to be nicer in your speech.”

I may be an old fool, but when a proud girl runs away from her home because her mother beats her, I understand her, and you—you bar your doors against her and call her bad names.”

“You ’ll drive me mad,” cried the ogre with exasperation. “Speak sense, if you can. What’s all this about beating?”

“Mària beat Lydia, and that’s why she ran away. Why, the whole village knows it!”

Vladimir Vladimirovich flushed an angry red. “My daughter!” he cried, and choked.

“Why did n’t you tell me this before?” he demanded after an ominous silence.

“I thought you knew.” Seraphima Profirovna’s drawl trembled with a hope she dared not express.

Then the storm broke. Vladimir Vladimirovich flung his napkin upon the table, upsetting his half-filled wine-glass, pushed his chair back noisily, with a vigorous push between the shoulders sent Vania flying out of the room, and pacing up and down gave vent to an angry tirade against his wife for daring to lay hands upon “*his* daughter.”

Seraphima Profirovna sat trembling with hope and fear, and when Vladimir Vladimirovich called angrily for Vania, swore at him for “hiding” when he was wanted, and sent him to Stepàn with an order for the phaeton to catch the evening train to town, she wept tears of joy into an enormous pocket handkerchief.

A few days afterwards, entering her room on her return from a walk, Lydia found her father impatiently waiting for her. She stood still in surprise, but Vladimir Vladimirovich rushed towards her, caught her in his arms, and kissed her solemnly on the forehead and both cheeks.

“ Why—why— ” he demanded reproachfully—
 “ Why did you not confide in me? If, instead of running away from home, you had appealed to me, all this would not have happened.”

Lydia tried to collect her scattered faculties. “ Do you wish me to return home?” she asked, and her voice seemed too cold, even to herself, but she could not feign joy at the thought of returning to her old life, even though the new did not fulfil her expectations.

“ My dear child, you shall do as you like. If you wish to continue staying with your aunt till the summer, do so, but my house and heart are open to you, Leda. Why did you not confide in me? I am your father, you know.”

“ If I tell you the truth, you will be angry, papa.”

“ Angry? I shall be delighted. You used to send me wild, you and your mother and Marusia between you. You with your eternal silence, your mother with her lies, and Marusia with her tears. Now, speak out. Why did n't you come to me instead of running away?”

“ Because I did not think of it. You have always seemed like a stranger to me. We have

seen so little of you. I remember once when I was little, I said 'thou' to you and tried to climb on your knee, and you were very angry and told me to learn to be more respectful. Some children never forget a repulse, and I have been—not exactly afraid of you—but never at my ease.”

“Afraid?” echoed her father in a pained voice. “What a mistake! Have you no intuition? Do you remember Miss Carey? She was never in the least afraid of me, and I was gentler to her than to any one else, just because she treated me like an ordinary mortal—not an ogre who must be propitiated.”

“I feel much more at my ease with you now than I ever did before,” said Lydia, smiling; “and I never tried to propitiate you, papa. You were always complaining of my ‘mulish silence.’”

Vladimir Vladimirovich looked at her critically: “Perhaps you are right,” he said slowly, “and I was too distant and stern with you, treating you as if you were a child in need of correction. And you are a woman grown, Leda! Heavens! is it possible? Such a short time ago you were a mite of a baby!”

“Twenty-one years ago!”

“How horribly precise! Twenty-one years! I’m an old man. And what have I to show for my life?”

Lydia’s joy at this sudden change in her father’s manner to her was only equalled by her puzzled

surprise. She was not sufficiently versed in psychology to expect inconsistency from such a character as Vladimir Vladimirovich's.

He remained nearly a week in St. Petersburg, took his son and daughter to the theatre, and treated them to the most expensive lunches and dinners, at one of which Minnie made a fourth. He then departed on his way to the Hydropathic Establishment, where his wife and Marusia were seeking balm for their tortured nerves.

The vials of his wrath—bottled up for the week—found yet another object on which to discharge themselves. Marusia had secretly married Nicolas Gregorovich, and, guided by their unlucky star the young pair had chosen just that day on which to break the news to Mária Alexandrovna.

That lady's mood was veering—after a storm—towards the pathetic and forgiving, when Vladimir Vladimirovich's appearance changed the spirit of the scene. It ended by the young doctor walking off with his wife, his curly head held very high, leaving Mária Alexandrovna in hysterics, and Vladimir Vladimirovich considerably relieved by the explosion of his long-pent-up rage.

PART IV
AT BIELOVKA

CHAPTER I

TEA, TOOTHACHE, AND BALDER THE BEAUTIFUL

“**R**EALLY, Hermione—Pardon, I have forgotten your father’s name.”

“Llewellyn,” said Minnie, mischievously, giving the word its Welsh pronunciation.

The duchess stumbled over the barbaric syllables, making them sound something like Devettline, and Minnie suggested leaving her father’s name out of the question when addressing her.

The duchess shut her automatic flower-fan with a snap. “A well-bred woman never permits herself to take liberties, Hermione Devettlineovna,” she exclaimed with dignity.

Translated into sincerity, that speech meant, “Though my son calls you wife, I shall never call you daughter.”

Minnie understood perfectly; she had never shut her eyes to the fact that in marrying Max she was entering a family and society most of

whose members would regard her as an alien, but being gifted with the adaptability which most Englishwomen lack, she was determined to harmonise with her surroundings.

She had been married quietly in St. Petersburg; only Vèra and the necessary witnesses being present at the ceremony besides the officiating priest and deacon. When the duchess heard the news, the impossibility of altering the situation did not reconcile her to it, nor prevent her from prophesying evil to her "unfortunate" son.

"She comes from Heaven knows where and is nobody's daughter," she exclaimed in despair; "and you might have made a really good match, Maximilian! Now you've lost your head like a *gymnast* of eighteen, for the sake of blue eyes and golden hair. Don't you see, unhappy boy, that she is one of those women who grow hideous before they are thirty? And then, what do you know of her former life? Only what she has been pleased to tell you."

"Mother," said Max, sternly, "not another word of that sort, or we shall quarrel seriously. Minnie is my wife, and far too good for me."

"I will admit that she is a model of virtue. Middle-class Englishwomen usually are. But you will be unhappy. One of my school-friends married a Padolian squire whose neighbour had married an Englishwoman, and was the most unhappy man in the world. His wife was a model

of virtue, but she turned the house into something worse than a prison with her rules and regulations. Three heavy meals a day, besides tea and cake and bread and butter at five o'clock, and *only* at five o'clock—no ever-boiling *samovar*. The poor man was obliged to dress for dinner every evening, never daring to sit down in a silk or linen coat even in the hottest weather, and she would have fainted with horror at the sight of a Russian blouse. The children were invisible except at stated hours, when they were brought in for a kiss and a little fruit, and he loved them passionately and was dull without them; and she froze all the guests, and was always grumbling in a superior, martyr-like way at having to live in a half-civilised country. She was not bad-looking as a girl, fresh and fair as so many of them are, but she dried up in a few years and became perfectly hideous, thin as a stick! The poor man did something dreadful I know—though I've forgotten exactly what—hung or shot himself, or went mad, or ran away, or something of that sort."

"I promise you I won't do any of those things," protested Max, solemnly, and went off to find Minnie.

"Impose what rules and regulations you like upon me," he said to her. "Condemn me to wear a swallow-tailed coat and starched shirt every evening of my life, burn my Russian blouses, order me to grow side-whiskers and dye my hair

red, make my house clamorous with gongs, but don't, Minishka, I implore you, don't banish the *samovar* and condemn me to three heavy meals a day. We Russians are famous for good living, but we have n't got as far as that yet. My mother declares you expect me to eat bacon and eggs and beefsteaks in the morning. Spare me! I prefer coffee and a roll, dinner at one, supper when I want it, and tea at all times."

"You shall never eat bacon and eggs in the morning, or dress for dinner in the evening. I swear it!" and Minnie lifted her hand in mock appeal to the sky as witness.

"And you won't burn my Russian blouses," he demanded anxiously, playing with the tassels of his belt. "See what a pretty colour this one is—just like your eyes—and so comfortable."

The duchess was staying at Bielovka on her way back to Italy to visit Leonora, whose marriage had fulfilled the greatest wish of her mother's life—at least in part. The happy man was a retired colonel, a widower and childless, whose chief wish since his retirement from military service had been to live in Italy, where the climate, he imagined, would act favourably upon his imaginary ailments. Two considerations had, for many years, prevented him from carrying out his wish—the difficulty of learning a foreign language, and the fear of being lonely without a life-long companion to whom he could speak Russian. For some time

he had sought a wife—young or old, pretty or ugly—who could speak Russian and Italian with equal fluency. The few young ladies of his acquaintance possessing the required linguistic qualities had been inconsiderate enough either to marry other men or to refuse the colonel's offer. Had he been given to classical quotations, he would have cried "Eureka!" on meeting with the duchess, and it was to that lady herself he first paid his addresses. But though the duchess's vanity was agreeably flattered by this proof of the durability of her charms, she did not feel inclined to forfeit her title and liberty for the sake of becoming a sort of perpetual Sister of Mercy to a *malade imaginaire*. When she refused the colonel's offer, she delicately hinted—varying a common formula—that she might be a mother to him. For a lady with pretensions to youth the word was difficult of utterance, and in pronouncing it the duchess felt she had offered a great sacrifice on the altar of maternity.

The colonel took the hint with—what the duchess considered—indecent haste, and a month afterwards took his double-tongued wife to Italy. The experience was not without its lesson to the duchess. She determined that Floria—who spoke Russian execrably—should be taught it thoroughly.

Vera, after staying at Bielovka till the middle of June, went to visit a friend in the next govern-

ment, and would only return home for a week or two before starting for Berne, so that, in Max's absence, Minnie had to face the duchess unprotected except for Floria's injudicious championship.

Every time the duchess found herself in the study with her daughter-in-law, she invariably called the latter's attention to the shabbiness of the furniture. "Don't you think, Hermione Devettlineovna," she would remark plaintively, "that you might use your wifely influence with Maximillian and induce him to buy a new divan, or at least have the old one re-covered?"

"It *is* rather shabby," owned Minnie, "but you see, duchess, if Max bought a new one it would clash with the rest of the room, and if we got an entire suite the other rooms would seem shabbier by contrast, and we really can't afford a complete refurnishing. After all, it is not so bad. It is very cosy, and Stepàn beats all the dust out of it regularly twice a week."

The duchess was particularly irritable one afternoon when Max had gone to take a look at the haymaking, and Minnie, loyal to the laws of hospitality, let him ride off alone and stayed at home to entertain her formidable mother-in-law.

It was very pleasant on the vine-screened verandah; below, the park extended to the edge of the river, and on either hand the cornfields were merged into the steppe.

Minnie had just handed a cup of tea, duly sweetened with three lumps of sugar, to the duchess, when Stepan came out on to the verandah to announce that a woman wanted to see *barina*.

"What can she want now, at this time of day?" demanded the duchess irritably.

"If you'll excuse me for a minute or two, I'll go and see," said Minnie, rising from the table and going into the back passage, where she found a peasant woman and a crying child awaiting her. The boy was suffering the agonies of toothache, and his mother poured out a flood of excuses and prayers at sight of Minnie, kissing her hands and the hem of her dress.

Minnie could not accustom herself to such greetings; Max looked upon them as a matter of course; he had been accustomed to them from his childhood, and gave his hand to be kissed with the good-natured indifference of a young and popular sovereign. "It is only a matter of custom," he had explained to his wife, "and it seems to me better than the woodenness you expect from your servants. I used to visit an English family in Petersburg. They had an English footman—burr!—it gave me cold shivers only to look at him. I like to see people about me, not graven images."

Minnie gently drew her dress out of the woman's grasp, and asked her what she wanted.

"*Matoushka-barina*, forgive me, sinful that I am! You give out your medicines at ten, but my

Vasia was well this morning, thank God, and now he suffers and leaves me no peace with his howlings, and Timothy Petroff calls God to witness that you have a little bottle and wadding which make the teeth well."

Minnie doctored the little lad, but would not trust the bottle to the mother. "If the pain begins again, bring him to me," she said as she went back to the verandah.

The duchess had finished her cup of tea, and would allow neither Floria nor Julietta to pour her out another and "usurp the place of the mistress of the house."

"I suppose," she said languidly, as her daughter-in-law reseated herself and resumed her duties, "that it was a matter of more or less importance which called you away?"

"Why don't you ask straight out what the woman wanted?" demanded Floria, showing her small, white teeth between her cherry-stained lips.

"You are hopelessly ill-bred, Floria! Who would believe you were a young lady of sixteen? At that age I was already a wife, and I may say without unworthy boasting that I was equal to the position."

"So should I be if I had the chance," retorted Floria. "Unhappily, nobody wants to marry me, as yet. I wish they did. It would be awfully nice to be mistress of a household. It's nice, is n't it, Minnusha? Especially when you're

young and pretty. You would n't be able to scold me any more then, mamma. I should think that that beautiful Ostrougoff was going to ask me, only I know he is married already without being really married, which means that they love each other desperately."

"You do not know what you are talking about, and had therefore better keep silence, Floria," commanded the duchess severely, and Minnie said, by way of changing the conversation: "It was nothing important after all, duchess. A little boy had a very bad toothache, and his mother brought him to me."

"But you really must not allow such things, Hermione Devettlineovna! The dispensary is open at stated hours, and you must make it clearly understood that you will not be troubled at other times. To be called away from your household duties to doctor a peasant boy's tooth! Indeed, it is my opinion that you had better leave these matters to Vèra or the doctor. Remember your last unfortunate mistake."

"But Vèra is away and the doctor comes so rarely!" exclaimed Minnie, "and Vèra taught me how to manage. I always refer to the notes she left if I am in any difficulty. Besides, that really was not my mistake. I told my patient to take ten drops twice a day, and she understood me perfectly."

"You should have written it on the label."

"I did so, of course, but neither she nor her husband can read. And she did n't forget my instructions, but merely thought she could improve upon them. Unfortunately, I had said that if she took the medicine regularly, she would most likely be well in a week or so, and she argued that if twenty drops a day would cure her in a week, the contents of the whole bottle would cure her at once."

"These peasants are really quite idiotic!" exclaimed the duchess.

"Did she die?" questioned Floria, with interest.

"Of course not. She was only very sick and dreadfully frightened."

"Are you sure you put *three* lumps of sugar in my tea?" demanded the duchess, sipping at the beverage. "It does not seem sweet enough."

"Minna put three, I counted," testified Floria.

"My dear,—" the duchess raised her eyebrows as she addressed her youngest daughter,—"I am quite aware that Hermione Devettlineovna is, in a way, your sister-in-law, but in view of the great difference in your ages, I really think you should be more respectful in your method of address."

"What an idea!" laughed Floria. "Why, Minna looks years younger than Leonora, and, besides, I really can't pronounce her awful father's name. I don't mean that your father is awful, Minnusha, only his name."

She sprang up from her seat as she spoke, kissed

Minnie, curtsayed to her mother, and ran down the steps into the garden. Minnie and Julietta would have been delighted to follow her, but the duchess demanded their attention. She drank two more cups of tea, criticised the biscuits, declared that the strawberries had been picked too late and the cherries too soon, that the cream was sour, and that Minnie had no idea how to do her hair.

“Waves are becoming and fashionable,” she said, “but why do you curl your hair?”

“I don’t,” protested Minnie, “it curls itself.”

She was tired of the conversation, and her Russian suffered by reason of her fatigue, though, as a rule, her speech was not nearly so picturesque and ungrammatical as formerly.

A laugh floated up from the garden, a man’s baritone and a girl’s shrill tenor mingling, and the duchess, glancing over the balustrade, smiled as she saw two figures emerge from the shrubbery and ascend the sanded path side by side.

Nico Ostrougoff, booted, belted, and spurred, struck at the flowers with his riding-whip as he passed, and the rose-bushes rustled, casting red and white petals at his feet. Floria was toying with a bud, nibbling at it with her sharp, white teeth, plucking at the half-open petals, and tossing it from one hand to the other, looking, in the softened sunlight of the late afternoon, as fresh as the flower she was thoughtlessly destroying.

Nico's face was reddened by the sun—he never burnt brown—and the additional touch of colour seemed to make him even handsomer than before. Whenever Minnie saw him, a solitary line from a forgotten poem always came into her head:

“Balder the Beautiful is dead—is dead!”

“Only he looks so very much alive,” she thought on the present occasion as he mounted the verandah steps. “He is really beautiful, but there is something lacking in his beauty, something brusque and arrogant in his every movement. Poor Claire!”

Just before the duchess's arrival the two young women had met. Their phaetons had crossed, and Minnie had ordered the coachman to pull up while she exchanged a few words with Claire. Ever since that day the French girl's pale and haggard face had been continually before the young wife's eyes, and she felt almost disloyal to her friend as she contrasted the latter's fate with her own. In what was she better than Claire? Claire had given herself unreservedly to the man she loved, while she herself had accepted the name and protection of the man who loved her.

“Is n't Max Ardilionovich at home?” asked Nico, as he sat down in a low wicker-chair and took the glass of tea Minnie offered him.

“He is superintending the haymaking,” said the duchess, “and will probably be back before long.”

“Lucky fellow!” sighed Nico. “Now I began

that job last week just before those confounded thunder-storms. Of course the hay is more than half spoilt, and if we have any more such beastly storms the crops will be no better."

He beat his spurred heel impatiently against the leg of his chair, thinking meanwhile, "The devil take all these women! I wanted to see Max."

"Really most unfortunate," said the duchess, fanning herself languidly. "Julietta, my love, give me another saucer of strawberries."

Julietta, thus appealed to, put down her embroidery in order to fulfil her mother's request, and afterwards returned to her silken stitching as silent as ever.

"Want some cherries, Nicolas Ivanovich?" asked Floria, putting double clusters of the fruit round her ears, where they hung like enormous ruby earrings. "I caught your longing glances, but I don't advise you to eat any unless you wish to see Moscow."

"Yes, they are very sour," admitted the duchess. "But who taught you that expression, Floria? It is most unbecoming."

Acidity evidently acts upon a Russian's vision; sour fruit does not set his teeth on edge, but makes him "see Moscow."

"Provoking little witch!" thought Nico, as Floria flashed a smile at him. "I should like to give her a kiss and shake her."

The French windows leading into the drawing-room opened from within, and Max, fresh from a swim and dressed in white linen, came forward to greet his guest.

"Very strong, and with lemon, please, Minna," he said, taking his seat. "Well, Balder the Beautiful, what news?"

"Can't see why you call me 'Balder,'" protested Nico; "the *chudak* over yonder began it and now it seems the fashion. Who is Balder, anyhow?"

"A Scandinavian god," said Max, precisely, squeezing the round of lemon against the side of his glass.

"I'm an Orthodox Russian," declared Nico, importantly, "and don't believe in Scandinavian gods. It's a sin to talk so, Max Ardilionovich; you ought to know better than the *chudak*."

Max stirred his tea in silence, smiling beneath his moustache. Nico's boast of his orthodoxy reminded him of a legend of Ostrougoff's school-days, which many declared to be fact. When asked to give the date of the introduction of Christianity into Russia, Nico had answered that he knew the year, but had forgotten whether it was before or after Christ. In spite of this anecdotal reply, the lad had obtained the certificate, thanks to which he had served but one year in the army as a "volunteer" instead of four years as a private. Several of his examiners had been his "coaches,"

and Ostrougoff *père* had paid them well for their pains. But when, emboldened by success, the old gentleman had sent his younger son to St. Petersburg to follow in the footsteps of his elder and pass the entrance examination of one of the numerous Academies or Institutes of the capital, the scandalised professors had instituted inquiries as to the methods employed in X— which enabled such “idiots” to matriculate.

“Well, what news, Nico?” repeated Max.

“Have n’t you heard? A peasants’ riot near Poltava.”

“A riot?” echoed the duchess. “What next?”

“There’s no university there, is there?” put in Floria, “and I thought only students rioted.”

“And workmen and peasants, too, sometimes, Floria Mariovna,” Nico assured her, with a flash of his white teeth.

“Serious?” inquired Max.

“There are different rumours. Some say that the houses of several squires were burnt, and their families treated with insult, that the military were called out, and there were arrests and floggings.”

“There’s no fear of *our* peasants rioting,” declared the duchess serenely, as if there had been no Alexander the Liberator and the villagers still actually belonged to the estate. “They are quite attached to Max; and so they should be. He thinks more of their interests than of his own and his family’s.”

“Riot spreads like a flame, duchess. Anyhow, I mean to be ready for anything. I always go armed,—” Nico touched his pocket as he spoke,— “and the peasant who throws a stone at my windows will pay dearly for it.”

“I really can’t imagine how any one can riot in this heat,” declared the duchess, fanning herself. “Max, has n’t the post come?”

CHAPTER II

GOLDEN SILENCE

NICO stayed at Bielovka till late in the evening, waiting—so he said—for the moon to rise and light him on his homeward ride; and Claire, left alone, wandered disconsolately round the gardens, re-entered the house, tried to read,—looking over the few old French books on the dusty shelves of the scanty library,—and woke jangling echoes in the drawing-room as she ran her unskilled fingers over the yellowed keys of the ancient spinet.

After speeding his departing guest, Max looked towards the house, but, as if on second thoughts, turned away from the lighted verandah and plunged into the shadows of the moonlit park.

His mother had prophesied that he would be unhappy in his marriage, and now he almost owned that she had been right. Minnie was perfect. It was not her fault if she had no heart to give him,—she had told him so before their marriage,—and he was suffering now for his own superb self-confidence. He had been so sure of his power of winning love that he had made her his wife

without a misgiving, and now, after three months, she met him with the same calm friendliness, accepted his kisses with the same unruffled self-possession, and was always gay, entertaining, and—elusive.

The presence of his mother and sisters was a relief to him. He rose at five in the morning, passed all but the burning siesta hours in the open air, and was glad to escape those long evenings alone with his wife, which latterly had grown to be a torment to him.

He passed through the park out upon the steppe where the mown hay lay tossed for drying, and the air was heavy with its scent. Brilliant above the boundless, level space, the stars shone steadily, scarcely dimmed by the moon. Max stopped and looked back towards the verandah from whence the sound of voices was borne clearly to his ears in the soft stillness of the night. He even heard the gallop of Nico's horse far away on the high-road.

Clear above the other voices rose Minnie's laugh. Max turned and strode quickly away.

But while he paced the steppe, courting that physical fatigue which brings dreamless sleep, the merry scene on the balcony changed its character. Julietta and Floria went to their room and Minnie was left with the duchess. The oil in the swinging lamp burned low, and, blowing the flame out, Minnie reseated herself in her low wicker chair.

"We don't need a lamp, do we, duchess?" she asked, tilting back her head and staring at the stars through the roof of wild vine-leaves.

"I cannot refrain from expressing—in the absence of my innocent daughters—my surprise at and disapproval of your conduct," said the duchess, solemnly.

Minnie could not see the connection between innocence and oil.

"But it was burning the wick, duchess. If you need a light, I——"

"I am not speaking about the lamp, Hermione Devettlineovna, but of something much more serious, though certainly a good housekeeper would not allow her servants to be so remiss. However, let that pass. I find it my painful duty as the mother of your husband to express my shocked surprise at your conduct."

She paused, evidently expecting protest or inquiry, but Minnie still gazed through the roof.

"You asked after the health of a—a person whose very existence it behoves you—as an honest woman—to ignore."

"I asked Nicolas Ivanovich after the health of his wife in the presence of my husband, and—as I thought—in the absence of those who might object to the question," said Minnie, calmly.

"I was just below in the garden, and could not but overhear your—ah—indiscreet question. Just

think how dreadful it would have been had Floria or Julietta been with me."

Minnie made no answer.

"And why do you call her his *wife*? You know very well they are not married."

Minnie still kept silence, not wishing to enter into a discussion with her mother-in-law on such a subject. The duchess's irritation pricked her on to pass all bounds.

"Such indulgence towards a sinful woman is very—ah—strange, Hermione Devettlineovna."

"But we receive the sinful man, and you say nothing against that," said Minnie.

"Hermione Devettlineovna! But that is quite another thing!"

"You think so?" Minnie's tone was negligent, as one who wishes to avoid argument, but crystal clear.

"Your championship of that miserable French girl is, as I said before, very strange. We are generally indulgent towards those faults we have committed or are inclined to commit ourselves."

Minnie rose to her feet, her hand resting on the arm of her chair. "Duchess!" was all she said as she turned and went into the house.

Her mother-in-law looked after her. "Of course she will tell Max, and there will be a serious quarrel. He will not forgive me. I should not have gone so far, but how she provoked me! 'The sinful man' indeed. As if men are not free to

do as they like. But a young girl! And now Max will be mortally offended. Why, oh, why, did he marry her?"

Minnie passed through the study out on to the small verandah, where Max slept on hot nights. Sitting down on the holland-swathed divan, she put her elbow on her knee, and, resting her chin on the palm of her hand, looked through the window cut in the leafy wall into the soft, silvered expanse of park below. She felt very sad. It was not that the duchess's shaft had struck so deeply—she took the words for what they were worth, and her virtue was not of that flimsy quality which shrinks affrighted and discouraged at the least spiteful word. The vague sadness of her mood was scarcely stirred by the insinuation. She had retreated disdainfully, and in the star-lit solitude the very memory of it was lost.

The murmur of voices came from the river-bank. She could even distinguish the tones, and almost the words. Stepàn's daughter was walking with her sweetheart, and suddenly question and response merged into song—one of those Little Russian ballads, from which, they say, Chopin so often wove his wondrous melodies.

"Where art thou, my black-browed love?"—

"Where art thou, my black-browed love?"—the words sounded distinct in the soft, scented night air.

The song ceased, the moon rose higher, the perfume grew stronger, as if the earth were breathing out her deepest fragrance in the deepening hush. A silvery mist, born of exhaled heat, rose upwards in fantastic shapes and hovered between earth and sky.

Max was versts away in the unmown, flower-spangled steppe. His whole being was tense with longing for the woman who sat alone beneath the vine leaves, saddened by his absence. But he would not seek her. Fool that he had been to think that her mere presence would content him! The lover cries in absence—"Oh, to *see* thee, beloved"; but when the desire of his eyes is before him the strong cry of his heart is for responsive *touch*.

It was very late when Max mounted the verandah steps. Minnie had heard his approach from afar, and her heart fluttered in her breast like a caged bird. She rose and came forward, looking in her light muslin dress almost as intangible as the floating shapes of silver mist.

"Minna!" exclaimed Max, grasping the balustrade.

"My dear child," he went on in a tone of light reproach. "You should not sit out so late when it is misty. It is two o'clock."

"So late?" she asked, with an uncertain laugh.

"And you are in that flimsy muslin! Good-night, dear. I'm dead tired."

She came close to him and lifted her face, like a child, to be kissed.

His moustache just brushed her lips. "Good-night," he repeated.

He was not afraid of the mist, and slept on the verandah, waking in the dewy freshness of the morning to walk barefoot through the park to his daily swim.

The duchess rustled on to the verandah at dinner-time, masking her misgivings with wreathed smiles and a flow of words. She had not seen Max all the morning, and Minnie's manner had been as usual, but the duchess had no need of tablets to set down that woman can smile and smile and smile and be—an avenger. She loved Max as much as she was capable of loving any one, and felt very bitter against the "foreigner" who had come between them.

"It was foolish of me to give her cause for complaint," she admitted for the hundredth time as Max came up the steps. "But she was so provoking."

When Max, as usual, kissed her hand and greeted her cheerily, she could scarcely hide her surprise.

For some time afterwards her feelings toward Minnie were far from friendly. It is very unpleasant to feel obliged to a person whom you wish to dislike, but Minnie's manner was so perfectly free from any consciousness of her own

magnanimity that the duchess was conquered in spite of herself, and even dropped the ceremonious "Hermione Devettlineovna."

"Minna has really the sweetest character in the world," she admitted to her son. "I am quite sure you will not be unhappy like that poor Padolian squire."

Max was sincerely glad that his wife's tactfulness had at length overcome his mother's hostility, but, for his own part, he would have welcomed a change from the unalterable sweetness with which she met him after hours of absence. He was rarely at home except for dinner and supper, and sometimes a peasant would bring a note to the effect that, having gone to Ostrougoff's on business, he would dine there. In the evenings, after joining the company at tea, he nearly always went for a walk by himself, returning to sleep on the verandah, and rising long before any one except the servants and peasants were up. And yet Minnie never complained of his absence or coaxed him to stay at home. He fled to escape the sight of her bright indifference, and she calmly accepted the pretext of "work."

"It is all the same to her," he thought. "Her drowned *fiancé* will always have the first place in her heart. And she was such a child! Why, they would have been calmly engaged for a decade. I thought that in a little while she would be mine without reserve, owning that the past had been

but the shadow of love—the friendly sympathy of English boy and girl. And she is as brightly cold as ever! Is it truth, after all, that old idea of Englishwomen's utter incapacity for passion? If I stay at home she is gay and friendly; but so she would be to Petrusha or the ogre himself."

But a few days after the duchess's departure, they had their first dispute. Max announced his intention of riding over to Ostrougoff's, and Minnie suggested that he might take her with him.

"I have asked you so many times," she protested. "I want to see Claire. She looked so ill when I met her last. I am sure she is lonely and unhappy, and there is not a soul to speak to her up there except Nicolas Ivanovich."

"She does not look well now," admitted Max, "and I am sincerely sorry for her. But I don't wish you to go and see her."

"Why on earth not?" flashed Minnie. "How unjust you men are! You let me receive Nicolas Ivanovich but expect me to avoid Claire! Why won't you let me go to her? For fear of what the 'district' might say, I suppose. The district indeed! The peasants, the townsmen of our insignificant town—a few garrison officers, a doctor or two, a dentist and a priest—and the Gortchnikoffs whom we don't visit. I thought you broader minded, Max!"

"Think what you like, but I don't wish you to go to Nico's," persisted Max.

"Because Claire is unfortunate you counsel me to keep away from her. What right have you to look down upon her? She loves that 'northern god,' as you call him. Oh, how stupid people are! They have nothing but poetic pity for Marguerite as the heroine of an opera or drama, but turn away from her in disdain or drag her deeper down when they meet her in real life."

"I neither despise nor insult Madame Claire. I merely refuse to let you visit her."

"Well, it is too late for me to go to-day without you, but I shall drive over myself one of these days."

"You won't do that, surely, Minna?" said Max, in a tone of hurt reproach. "It will be going against my express desire."

"What am I to do, Max? I do not wish to 'go against your express desire,' but neither can I leave Claire to think herself deserted and utterly alone. I am sure that splendid Nico of yours is tired of her already. Think what she must suffer! Why, the slightest friendly word may give her courage now."

Minnie's voice was trembling, but, faithful to her habit of avoiding any display of feeling, she tried to laugh. "Besides, I am dull myself sometimes."

"Dull?" echoed Max, and a light sprang into his eyes. "Why, I thought you were never dull. You have your music and your beloved English

books and magazines, your birds, your dispensary, and other interests."

"But I miss companionship now your mother and sisters are gone."

She did not say—"And you are so seldom at home."

The light in Max's eyes died out. "Oh, indeed!" was all he said.

"It is such a pity," went on Minnie, "that you quarrelled with Vladimir Vladimirovich."

"That Vladimir Vladimirovich quarrelled with me," corrected Max.

"The consequences are the same. We don't visit, and it's *such* a pity. Vassalisa tells me that Lydia has come home. We were so friendly when I was her companion, and it seems quite ridiculous living so near and never meeting."

"Yes, it's a pity, but you can't expect me to eat humble pie so that you and Lydia may meet. You are sure to see each other sooner or later out walking or driving or boating, and I'm afraid you must be content with that."

Max spoke with barely repressed irritation. "She is already tired of being alone with me," he thought as he rode towards Ostrougoff's.

CHAPTER III

IVANOVA NOCH

THE sun was setting as Max rode towards Ostrougoff's estate, and the level steppe was aflame, while the river changed from crimson to warm gold and slowly settled into rippled mother-of-pearl. The song of home-bound peasants came clear across a distance of three versts or more, and the echo of his horse's hoofs seemed to Max to be flung back from the very confines of the earth. Suddenly the red ball of the sun sank below the level line of the horizon, as if in conquered homage to the moon, pale as a fleecy cloud against the paling sky; the song died away, and a stillness fell upon the seemingly immeasurable space—a stillness that throbbed to every hoof-beat.

Presently the hush echoed to a cry, a single word thrilling with fear, exasperation, and anger, which the serene steppe flung back in disdain. "Claire! Claire! Claire!"

Max thought he must have dreamed that name; there was not a soul in sight, but still the cry was repeated clearly and more clearly, "Claire! Claire!" and then a long "A-oo!"

As the narrow horse-path branched off sharply to the right, Max saw the dark mass of Nico's gardens, and the scattered huts of the peasants outlined against the darkening sky, and nearer, between him and the village, a tall man walked slowly with bent head, as if searching for a lost treasure, standing still at intervals to put his hands over his mouth and shout—"Claire! A-oo!"

At sight of the horseman the figure ran forward and hailed Max long before they could distinguish each other's faces. "Max. Thou?"

"I," shouted back Max, and the echoes flung the word across the steppe to mingle with the echoing "Thou?"

"Seen Claire?"

"No."

Nico came close with a rush and laid a hand that trembled on the horse's mane.

"You know," he panted, "this is awful. She's gone. Made me a scene and ran away." His voice rose in exasperation and he passed his hand over his uncovered brow. "I did not miss her until just now. It was nearly an hour ago. *Doura, doura! Ah, Bofhia!* The devil only knows why he created women!"

"Do you think she has done something desperate?"

"Looks like it. She has n't taken her passport or anything. She is n't in the house or the gardens. The devil only knows what it all

means. *Doura!* Of course I would have provided for her and the child. But I never dreamt of marrying her. Never promised. She had no right to expect it. And I could not let her stay in the house with my brother and his wife coming. Of course, if it had been only Alexis, it would n't have mattered. But his wife! And she was offended. But I promised to give the child my name and bring it up at home. I meant it, too. What more had she a right to expect? Most men would simply have told her to go, and nothing else. As if I could marry her! And now she wants to make me seem a brute and a murderer. *Bofhia moy!*"

Max swung himself from the saddle. "We must look for her while there is still a little light. The moon rises slowly and it will soon be dark for several hours."

"The path is so hard—there has not been rain for a long time, and she always walked lightly. I cannot find her traces, but she must have come this way. She did n't pass through the village, I know. We must look near the water where the banks are moist and clayey. Ah—*proklatie, proklatie!*"

He turned away, leaving Max uncertain whom he was cursing, himself or Claire or the world in general.

There was not a tree in sight to which a horse could be tethered, nothing but the level of the

mown steppe, with the second growth springing up and already turning yellow from heat. Holding the reins in his hand, Max followed in Ostrougoff's wake, shuddering as he glanced down at the slowly flowing river with its seemingly quiet current, which he knew to be so cruelly strong. The soft darkness of the summer night was sweeping down apace, and soon the search would be interrupted. Suddenly Nico, walking close to the water's edge among the brown withered rushes, stopped and looked up at Max standing on the bank above. "Here! Here!" he screamed, pointing downwards with a hand that shook. "Look! Here! Oh, *proklatie!*"

He dropped on his knees and scanned the damp earth carefully. Max let Tolotaiya's reins fall, and swinging himself over the bank, joined Nico. In the soft ground the print of tiny French shoes was visible—just the tip and a dented heel—to the very water's edge.

"*Bofhia!*" gasped Max.

Nico made the sign of the cross with a shaking hand, and broke into a flood of oaths and prayers. With difficulty Max got him away from the river and home; there was nothing to be done that night. The next day the river must be dragged, or perhaps its current would bring Claire's body back to her lover's house.

"Don't leave me," pleaded Nico, as they neared the house, Max regulating Tolotaiya's pace to

Ostrougoff's stride. "She may visit me, you know. Christ! What is that?"

He started aside with a scream. A low-hanging vine-tendrill, wet with the mist, had touched his cheek. He broke it off viciously and trampled it underfoot.

Entering the dining-room he drank off a glass of *vodka* and paced the room.

"I swear it is not my fault, Max. I promised to look after her till she was well again, and to take the child. What right had she to expect more? Why—many men would n't even have done that. She came to me of her own free will. I never forced her."

"She loved you," Max reminded him in a strangled voice.

"Many women have loved me. But that passes. Ah, *doura!* She killed herself for spite, to make me seem a murderer. But it's not my fault—*ey Boga!* A man can't love one woman all his life, you know."

Through the open window came bursts of laughter and shrill screams of simulated fear. Max, leaning against the frame, caught the gleam of fires through the thick foliage of the garden beyond.

"Ah, *Ivanova noch,*" he said. "I had forgotten."

"*Ivanova noch,*" repeated Nico, coming close to the window and laying his hand on Max's shoulder. "The demons are in force to-night guarding

the flower of the *papertnik* and roaming the woods and steppe. What is the German legend about to-night, Max? Something about the souls of suicides. What is it?"

"Ah—nothing," said Max, impatiently.

But Nico persisted, and Max called to mind tales of Gogol and of Hoffmann—the Russian and the German—wild as the summer lightning which rends the heavens on St. John's Eve, as if in very truth the souls of suicides, mad with despair and hate, were let loose to war against those mortals who dare to dream of happiness or grasp at power.

"I saw a German drama once at X——," said Nico. "I have half forgotten it. Something about suicides. What is the idea?"

"That the souls of suicides—the very essence of unsatisfied desires—rise clothed in flames that burn across the night; and all the evil in us,—the wild desires, repressed brutality, half-formed thoughts of crime, the arrogance that stirs in the depths of our souls questioning God and daring the powers of evil,—rise also, flaming out their passion unrestrained for that one night."

Nico dropped his hand and stared through the gloom at the twinkling fires. "They are real fires," he said. "The peasants lighted them and the lads are leaping over them. Listen!"

A clearer burst of laughter, and shrill girls' voices calling, "*Molodetz, Vanko!*"

"But there *is* something in the night," per-

sisted Nico. "Something creepy. It always lightens. Always."

"That is easily explained by natural laws. And not only this night—for about a week the air is overcharged."

But Nico had passed through the open window and was pacing the verandah. A heavy silence fell between the two young men, while the laughter and screams still echoed from the river and the fires twinkled through the darkening gardens.

"I must go," said Max at length.

"Well, go with God," said Nico, gloomily.

Beyond the lighted, laughter-echoing village, in the quiet of the steppe, Max let the reins hang loose and rode slowly. The night was cloudy, and at intervals the west was torn by lightning like the broad flash of a flaming sword. Was it indeed the gate of Paradise guarded by an unseen angel-warrior waving a visible weapon against invisible demon-foes—suicides, desperate and rebellious fallen spirits cast down to the depths for aspiring to the heights, demons of unconquerable pride, envy, and insatiable desire, surging clamorously against the portals leading to those spheres where each soul finds its completion, and every longing is merged in universal peace? Peace—while the lost souls clamour at the portals, shrinking before the brilliance of the inexorable brand?

"I might be a German mystic," said Max, half-aloud, tightening his hold upon the reins and, with

the merest touch of the spur, quickening Tolotaiya's pace into a gallop. When he drew rein again he might have been careering in a circle for all the change in the scenery. The boundless steppe still stretched beneath the lightning-riven sky; late though it was, the air was hot and heavy and perfumed, though the hay was gathered in.

"It is the scent of the magic flower," thought Max. "And it grows in the steppe after all, not in the forest. What if I find it? Will its demon-guards give way before me, yielding me the secrets of all the hidden treasures of the earth, and the magic that subdues all things to a man's will?"

He was interrupted by a sudden flash of lightning, so broad and so prolonged as to suggest the tearing of the veil masking the golden portals—and close upon it a sobbing cry which sounded shrilly in the heavy stillness, a cry seeming to come from the ground.

Max drew rein and held his breath to listen. The distinct repetition of the cry assured him of its reality. He dismounted, and, holding the bridle, walked slowly forward, guided by the sound, which, repeated at intervals, seemed at last to break forth at his very feet. He glanced over the bank to where the tall, shrivelled reeds rustled, rattling weirdly, though there was not a breath of wind. He descended to the water's edge, and, parting the rushes, stood motionless,

looking down at a prostrate woman's form, shaken by sobs.

He came of a superstitious race, and his blood ran cold as the legends of the night crowded into his mind. Would the form at his feet dissolve into air, and the desperate soul flame beneath the flaming sky? With a mighty effort he retained his self-possession, and, kneeling, touched the prone figure, shuddering as his hands grew wet at the contact.

"Claire!" he said, half lifting her from the ground and resting her head against his knee.

She stared unseeingly into his face. "Who is it?" she asked at length.

"I, Max Galovkine. Don't you know me? I have come to look for you, and will take you home. Nico is wild with anxiety."

"Nico?" she repeated. "But he has cast me out."

"No! No!" He stroked her wet hair awkwardly. "He was looking for you and calling. Did n't you hear? It is awful to think of you lying here all these hours. You are stiff with cold."

"I ran—and ran," she said wearily; "and then it seemed as if there was nothing for me to do but to drown myself. But the water was cold, and—and I could not help swimming, and then it grew shallow, and I got out and fell among the reeds."

“But did n't you hear Nico calling you?”

“I heard nothing. I thought I was dead when I came to myself, dead with a stone on my breast. It presses on me now. I am cold.”

Max carried her up the bank to where Tolotaiya stood placidly cropping the burnt grass. Placing Claire sideways on the saddle, he told her to cling to the mane, and steadying her with one hand and grasping the bridle with the other, he strode forward. But Tolotaiya was not to be withheld from breaking into a trot, and Claire, uttering a low cry, slipped from the saddle into Max's arms.

There was nothing to be done but walk the four or five versts which lay between them and Ostrougoff's. The comparatively short distance seemed endless. Claire was half-unconscious, shivered and moaned, and complained alternately of cold and heat. Sometimes carrying, always supporting her, Max hurried on desperately, and still broad bands of lightning girdled the west.

The dark mass of the gardens, silvered by the uncertain, fitful moonlight, loomed across his path at last, and lifting Claire bodily in his arms, he plunged into it, steering towards the verandah where he had left Nico. When he reached it, the place was dark and silent, and putting Claire down upon the lower step he searched his pockets for a match. Claire, clinging to the balustrade, dragged herself slowly up the steps. Behind her, Max struck a light, and holding it above his head,

peered into the shadows and saw Nico lying on the divan. The match burnt his fingers, and he flung it down with an exclamation. Nico sprang up. "Who is there?" he asked sharply, and mechanically his hand went to his breast pocket.

"Nico!" said Claire, and leant trembling against the trellis-work.

Nico sprang back. "For Christ's sake—for Christ's sake!" he cried wildly. "Keep off! It was not my fault, Claire! For God's sake, don't torment me! *Bofhia, Bofhia!* Go away!"

He sank back against the vine-masked framework and it shook with his trembling.

Claire took a step forward. Nico screamed hoarsely and made the sign of the cross with shaking hands. "*Radi Christa! Radi Christa!* Claire!" he repeated.

"Nico!" Max's voice sounded very stern. "Be a man. Don't you see she is alive and in pain? Take her to her room while I send for the doctor. Don't stand there raving."

The sharp, practical tones steadied Nico's nerves. He passed his hand over his forehead, wet with the sweat of fear. "Ugh!" he exclaimed. "How you startled me!"

Claire had sunk into a seat, moaning faintly. He approached and leant over her.

"Ugh!" he repeated, starting back. "She is wet."

"I am cold, Nico—so cold," murmured Claire.

Nico stood uncertain for a moment, then, with a strong shudder, bent to lift her in his arms as if half afraid that she might elude his touch.

The district doctor was not to be found. The town was fifty versts away, and long before help came Claire was alternately raving deliriously and screaming in conscious agony. Nico wandered gloomily through the rooms, and Max, wearied and harassed, slept fitfully on the verandah.

“For heaven’s sake don’t go till the doctor comes!” implored Nico.

“So soon, so soon, Nico!” moaned Claire at intervals.

When in the morning the doctor came at last, he declared that he could not answer for the consequences of the necessary operation.

“If I had been on the spot I might have saved her, but now——”

“For God’s sake put her out of torture, at least,” said Nico, hoarsely. “If she dies under chloroform she won’t suffer.”

“So soon, Nico!” murmured Claire as the anæsthetic soothed her into everlasting sleep.

CHAPTER IV

"A STEED CAME AT MORNING"

EARLY in the morning, Stepàn, crossing the courtyard on his way to rouse the outdoor servants, saw Tolotaiya, saddled and girthed, with trailing reins, calmly pulling at the newly-stacked hay. The old major-domo's anger was kindled against the stable-lads.

"Sons of dogs! Swine!" he exclaimed. "How comes it that you have not stabled the horse of *panitch*?"

Married though he was, Max was still "*panitch*" to Stepàn.

"Wh-at?" drawled one of the "swine." "But *barin* did n't come home last night."

"Why lie so—pig? Tolotaiya is here. *Panitch* would not go to rest without rousing one of you to take Tolotaiya. You answered him, and slept again, forgetting, sluggards that you are!"

The lad crossed himself. "There's the cross for you, Stepàn Ivanovich. May the devil devour my liver, may the jackals of the steppe howl over my father's grave, if I lie!"

Stepàn regarded him with the same expression

with which Seraphima Profirovna received Akulina's most picturesque oaths.

"Look you here, Ivanovich," said the coachman, joining the group in all the glory of a bright yellow blouse and high boots with broad trousers stuffed into them. "I don't say but that I sleep heavy at times after a friendly glass in honour of a saint, but when *barin* comes home and knocks at the door with his whip and shouts for us to come and take his horse, I always hear him. And last night he did not come. There 's the cross for you, Ivanovich."

Stepàn's jaw dropped. "But Tolotaiya!" he repeated as he turned and hurried back to the house and on to the verandah where the divan arranged as a bed stood with its snowy sheets untossed and its pillows undented.

Stepàn's face grew blank, and then suddenly wrinkled into a broad smile.

"Now thou seest with thine own eyes and believest—Thomas that thou art!" said a voice from the steps, and, turning, he faced the coachman.

"Thou fool! And can *panitch* sleep nowhere else but on the verandah? He 's a lawfully wedded husband."

"But Tolotaiya left loose like that! *Barin* is not home, Stepàn Ivanovich."

"Where can he be, then."

"That only God knows," said the coachman, crossing himself piously. "God grant that he

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may be safe in his bed, but I doubt it. It was the night of the powers of evil, and Tolotaiya is riderless.”

Stepàn swore at him roundly, but he was getting thoroughly frightened himself. The servants gathered in groups and talked of the *papertnik* and its demon-guards.

“*Barin* went to look for it in the forest of the Green Valley, and the devils have destroyed him,” they asserted, and wondered why Stepàn did not order a search for the body, and whether it would be found, or if the demons had devoured it or dragged it down to their dark haunts.

Minnie rose after nine—she had gone to bed very late—and hurried on to the large verandah to drink coffee before opening her dispensary. Stepàn greeted her with a heavy sigh.

“What’s that for, Stepàn?” she asked, smiling.

“Nothing, *barina*, nothing.”

He fidgeted with the cups, and said coaxingly: “*Barina*, do you know where *panitch—barin*, I mean—went last night?”

“To Ostrougoff’s,” said Minnie, looking up from her coffee in surprise. “Why?”

“Nothing, *barina*, nothing. So.”

He was turning away with the resolve to send at once to Ostrougoff’s when Minnie stopped him.

“Stay, Stepàn. I can’t understand you all this morning. Vassilisa has been crying and brushed

my hair as if she were preparing me for my own funeral, Dasha looks miserable, and you woe-stricken. Why?"

"Ah—so, *barina*. I am an old man, sinful and unhappy. Age is not gladness. So."

"Why did you ask about *barin*? Have n't you seen him this morning?"

"No, *barina*."

"He has gone to the fields, of course."

"Not so. He always bathes first and comes back for his breakfast. It's ill riding miles on an empty stomach."

"So you think he has not come home?" faltered Minnie. Then she added brightly, "Silly Stepàn, to be frightened at nothing! He slept at Ostrougoff's, of course."

Stepàn fell on his knees and caught her hand, covering it with kisses. "*Barina*—my dove! Ah, *Bofhia*—unhappy that I am! Tolotaiya came home riderless."

Minnie stood motionless looking down at him. What was the old man murmuring in an unknown tongue? The one phrase—translated mechanically—beat into her brain—"Tolotaiya came home riderless!"

She repeated it aloud, in English.

Stepàn rose stiffly. "What did you say, *barina*?"

Minnie looked at him blankly, then with a swift rush of pain her stunned energies woke.

“Saddle Jhelaniya. I will ride over to Ostrougoff’s.”

Stiff and tense she stood. All her faculties were strained in the one desire to know the truth. And then? The question was like the lifting of a veil. She dropped it—dazzled. Her thoughts never reverted to the tragedy of six years ago.

She scarcely remarked that Stepàn followed her as she took the narrow horse-path along which Max had ridden the night before. The unshaded June sunshine—almost as cruel as the winter frost—beat down upon her unheeded. She looked straight beyond her across the steppe, blind to the sunshine-flecked river, the curved mirror of the turquoise sky; her eyes were fixed upon the low horizon line. At length that level line was blurred at one point and an indistinct form moved against it, gradually shaping itself into horse and horseman, and then the slim figure of the latter, clad in white, was distinctly visible though the face was as yet unrecognisable. The torture of hope broke Minnie’s self-control,—she urged Jhelaniya into a wild gallop.

“Minna!” shouted her husband.

The sudden joy was so fierce that she could scarcely control it. The sound of many waters was in her ears, a dazzling mist before her eyes.

“What on earth are you out riding in this heat for?” said Max, and she felt his hand on her bridle rein.

The mist cleared, and she smiled into his face. He looked dreadfully tired, and his white jacket was stained with mud and green water.

“To look for you.”

Her voice trembled with emotions over which joy triumphed in one clear note.

She looked round her and drew a long breath of the hot, scented air.

“Oh,” she said—“before—just now—it was dark.”

They were riding slowly side by side. As she had controlled her despair, now her joy was almost silent, but it shone in every glance, even in the quiver of her lashes; her very pose was buoyant. Max, wearied and sick to the heart as he was, felt the magnetism of her intense happiness.

“All the same,” he said, his tired eyes brightening as they met hers, “I don’t in the least understand.”

“Tolotaiya came home riderless.”

Again the note of joy rang out clear in the same phrase that, from Stepàn’s lips, had struck her numb.

Max looked at her in silence. Then he said slowly: “The rogue! I was looking for her. So she came home and frightened you. I am glad.”

“Glad?” echoed Minnie. She looked puzzled. Then gradually a light of comprehension deepened the happiness in her face.

“ I am glad, too,” she said.

It was their only explanation. He laid his hand over hers, and both understood their blindness and their happiness.

“ Glory to God, *panitch*, that you are safe and unharmed.”

Stepàn, riding up to his master, kissed and cried over the hand Max held out to him with a smile.

“ You old stupid!” he said good-naturedly. “ What did you suppose could happen to me? And you frightened *barina* to death.”

“ Tolotaiya came home without you, *panitch*, and it was *Ivanova noch*.”

With this satisfactory explanation, the old man fell behind and ambled leisurely in the wake of his *ghospoda*.

“ But something has happened to you, Max,” said Minnie, breaking a long silence. “ You look dreadful. Did you fall into the river? Your jacket looks like it.”

Max’s face clouded. It seemed heartless to rejoice in his own fulness of life with Claire’s death so fresh in his memory.

“ And I—Pharisee that I was—refused to let you go and see her,” he said to Minnie later on, in bitter self-reproach.

Claire was buried the same day in Nico’s garden, not far from the enclosure where lay the graves of his ancestors, marked by simple stone crosses.

The newest bore a rough inscription: "Forgive, O God, the soul of thy slave Ivan."

The priest was with difficulty prevailed upon to read a prayer over the dead girl. She had lived in sin, "her death was doubtful," and, moreover, she was a heretic. Nico took the cross from his own neck and hung it on hers. Perhaps he imagined that it might effect her entrance into the heaven of the "orthodox."

The fierceness of his alternate remorse and self-justification burnt itself out quickly. Before a month was over he was as vividly arrogant as ever. His romance with Claire passed into the list of his love-affairs, distinguished by the tragic end, for which he was "not to be held responsible, *ey Boga.*"

"If you had only seen her a few months ago," he said to his brother. "A beauty—a real beauty! But she was too soft. Could n't stand a harsh word. And I'm quick-tempered, you know."

He smoked silently for a while, silently sipping at his wine every now and again.

"Pity the duchess has gone," was his next remark. "Galovkine's mother, you know. One of her daughters is a horror, but the youngest is a 'fruit.' Fresh as a cucumber, and the prettiest little demon imaginable. *Ey Boga!*"

CHAPTER V

A WARNING

SERAPHIMA PROFIROVNA sat in her own particular chair, which had been removed by Akulina's *gloved* hands under her mistress's supervision from the dining-room to the terrace overlooking the park. The old lady's appearance was not altered in the least. Her dress was of lighter material and the upper portion of it was grey instead of black, but it was just as short and shabby as the winter robes; her cap was set as rakishly as ever on her untidy, grey hair, and her ample feet were still encased in hideous felt slippers.

The barking of the dogs in the courtyard could be heard now and again on the terrace, and had Seraphima Profirovna been consistent she would have refused to breathe the air profaned by a barking or even a silent dog, but she contented herself with saying placidly: "I wonder what those cursèd dogs are barking at."

"At each other; they are always quarrelling," declared Marusia, crossly, coming on to the terrace with her mother.

Marriage had improved her wonderfully. Her

hair was no longer grey—a skilful *coiffeur* tinted it twice a month,—her complexion was clearer, and she had lost the horribly lifeless look which had made Minnie think of a galvanised corpse. Nicolas Gregorovich had married for sordidly practical reasons. His wife's allowance almost doubled his salary, and he had justly calculated upon Maria Alexandrovna's speedy forgiveness and pecuniary aid. To allow her favourite daughter to hold a decent place in the society of the government town, Madame Gortchnikova sacrificed more than half the income derived from the small estate which had been her husband's wedding present to her. But the young doctor did not neglect to fulfil his side of the bargain. He was attentive to his wife and careful of her health, undertaking the cure of her nerves with professional interest and the individual care of a man determined not to let his wife's hysterics spoil his well-ordered life. He drew the line between indulgence and harshness at just the requisite point, and, while letting his wife believe that he adored her, made her feel that he was master.

“Kola worships me,” Marusia declared to her mother. “My only rival is science. He studies so much, the poor boy! and attends so many lectures and consultations. He wants to try for the degree of Doctor of Medicine next year. But, though often compelled to leave me, his delight at returning is quite beautiful.”

Some women are born to live in a fool's paradise. Perhaps it is the best place for them. Marusia was comfortable enough in hers.

Vladimir Vladimirovich had at length consented to receive his daughter, but his forgiveness did not extend to Nicolas Gregorovich. "Well, well, let her come for a week or two," he said, wearied into compliance with his wife's wishes—"but without her husband."

Mària Alexandrovna rustled on to the terrace in a white and gold tea-gown, fanning herself with a desperate energy certainly not calculated to produce coolness.

"And Vladimir is not here, and the tea is getting cold," she exclaimed, looking at the tray where the teapot stood on the jug of hot water which replaced the *samovar*. "He ordered it at three, and will be wild if it is cold. Has he been called, aunt?"

"Twice," drawled Seraphima Profirovna.

Marusia sat twisting her wedding-ring with something of her old listlessness.

"And where is Pavloosha?" demanded Mària Alexandrovna.

"He has gone fishing."

"Am I never to drink tea with my only son?" exclaimed Mària Alexandrovna, clasping her hands. "Marusia, don't touch that pimple, you 'll only make it worse."

"Yes, be careful never to touch a pimple,"

advised Seraphima Profirovna, solemnly; "one of the friends of my youth, Anna Petrovna,"—here followed the said Anna Petrovna's genealogy,—"had a pimple on her cheek once, and she scratched it, and that same evening she gave her soul to God."

"And where is Lydia?" Mária Alexandrovna continued, like a fretful hen counting her chickens.

"Here, mamma," said a clear voice, and Lydia rose from beside the fountain which was half-way down the steps.

She looked younger and yet more womanly than last year, her eyes were softer, but the curve of the lips was as proud as ever.

"*Dourak!*" screamed the parrot as she passed the perch.

"How ungrammatical! You should say '*doura*,' she corrected, stopping to caress the bird's shining green head.

"How can you possibly expect a parrot to understand grammar?" demanded Mária Alexandrovna, pettishly.

"How dull it is!" sighed Marusia. "Mamma, don't you ever have visitors? It was bad enough last year, still some one did put in an appearance at times, even if it was only Max Ardilionovich."

"I wish your father had n't quarrelled with him," sighed Madame Gortchnikova in sympathy. "I am quite sure you have forgotten English, and you might have had practice with his wife. I

can't understand Max. What *did* he see in her? And she is n't noble."

"She is a *dvorianka* now," drawled Seraphima Profirovna. "And I'm glad. She was a nice little thing, though too thin for my taste. Her shoulders were n't so bad, though."

"She is charming," declared Lydia.

"I don't see it," insisted her mother. "You are much better, and yet you are not married!"

"Mamma—please!" There was a note of command in the entreaty.

"Oh, very well. You are in your twenty-second year now, and have full authority from your father to do exactly what you like and take no notice of your unhappy mother. But I cannot but feel regret at the spoiling of your life. If only we could persuade your father to make friends with young Galovkine. Peter Petrovich is staying there now."

Lydia said nothing, for the fact was no news to her. Taking advantage of her liberty she had called on Minnie once and met her out walking several times; but on hearing that Korsakoff was expected she had ceased even to cross the river, forgetting that her studied avoidance of her favourite haunts was a proof that she was not indifferent.

Seraphima Profirovna joined in her niece's lamentations over the loss of Peter Petrovich as a possible *fiancé*,—on this one subject they were in

unity,—but Vladimir Vladimirovich's entrance brought relief to Lydia and interruption to her tormentors.

“If this heat continues,” said the ogre, sitting down and wiping his forehead with a large cream silk pocket-handkerchief, “we shall get accustomed to the temperature of hell and find it no punishment to be there. Eh, aunt?”

“Speak for yourself, Voloda,” answered the old lady loftily. “I'm an Orthodox Christian, and, sinful though I am, I hope for the kingdom of heaven.”

“But you never go to church.”

“God knows that it is far and that I fear dogs. But for every important saint's day we have a service here. Don't try to frighten me, Voloda.”

But the ogre's attention was fixed upon the teapot.

“Why—why—” he exclaimed angrily—“why can I never get a decent glass of tea in my own house?”

“But, Vladimir,” remonstrated his wife, “you ordered tea at three, and now it is nearly four, and you *won't* have a *samovar*. How is the tea to be kept hot?”

“It's not my business to know how,” retorted the ogre. “I only know it must be hot while I am master here. Do as you like when I am dead and buried, Maria Alexandrovna,—but at present *I* command.”

He strode into the dining-room, calling loudly for the footman.

"You lazy wretch! What do you mean by expecting me to drink cold tea?" he demanded.

The man—the fourth or fifth since Efime—answered boldly: "If you don't allow me to bring in the *samovar* and don't come to tea till long after you are called, it is not my fault if the tea gets cold, Vladimir Vladimirovich."

"Be silent, wretch! What!—you presume to dictate to me, do you? Not a word, or I'll kick you out of the house. Bring another jug of boiling water at once, you rascal!"

The man stood for a moment, evidently controlling himself with difficulty, then, remembering his deposit and the difficulty of finding another situation in a hurry, he turned and went out of the room to execute the ogre's command.

The latter returned to the terrace, pushed away his glass of tea pettishly, and attacked the fruit.

"The insolence of these fellows!" he ejaculated. "The confounded insolence! Who's master here, I should like to know? They'll have to find out that *I* am. The rascals!"

The dogs in the courtyard began to bark furiously, stopping suddenly as if recognising a familiar or compelling voice.

"*Bofhia moy!*" cried Seraphima Profirovna nervously, while the parrot flapped its wings and screamed in an ecstasy of delight.

The terrace was high, and the entrance to the courtyard was hidden by untended, wildly luxuriant rose-bushes, so that no one was aware of the approach of a stranger until a voice called from below: "Vladimir Vladimirovich Gortchnikoff!"

The ogre was surprised into response.

"I? Who wants me?"

For answer the new-comer mounted the steps with bare, noiseless feet, and coming within sight of the group on the terrace, stopped and looked towards Gortchnikoff.

"What do you want?" demanded the latter, sharply. "Who let you pass? I gave strict orders——"

"I know your pride, brother, and your avoidance of your fellow-men, but I am not to be hindered in my mission. I have a question to ask you."

"You had much better be off!"

"Are you serious in your refusal to let your land to the peasants for the autumn sowing?"

"Of course. Not an inch shall the rascals have. Now you know and—be off!"

The barefooted man raised his hand with a gesture so simple in its command that Gortchnikoff sat still and stared at him.

"God has given you riches in trust, brother. How can you contemplate such abuse? How can you dream of causing famine and distress for mere spite? Call to mind the parable of the Rich Man.

'And the Lord said unto him—Thou fool, this night thy soul shall be required of thee.'"

"Oh, this is too much," exclaimed Gortchnikoff, starting up. "Be off, you drivelling idiot, or I'll pitch you down the steps or secure you as a suspicious character and send for the police. No doubt you are one of those wretches who stirred up the peasants to revolt in Poltava."

"I have indeed come from Poltava, and am passing through your village on my way to the north. But my mission is to soothe, not to incite to revolt. 'Those who take the sword shall perish by the sword.' Our only weapon should be 'the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God.'"

Gortchnikoff laughed. "Now I know what sort of bird you are. The same perhaps who, a couple of years ago, was arrested for preaching against military service."

"The same."

"At this rate you'll get yourself into prison again in no time."

The young man smiled gently, almost childishly.

"Without doubt. But I must not keep silence. Brother, think of what you are doing. The harvest is over—the insufficient harvest of last autumn's sowing. You refused to let your land for the spring sowing, and the peasants murmur against you as they think of the long, distressful

winter. But if you persist in your refusal, absolute famine stares them in the face. Think of it, brother. You *cannot* do this thing! What would you feel if your own children cried to you for bread and you had none to give them?"

"*Quelle drôle!*" said Marusia to her mother, leaning back in her chair and examining her nails.

"Send him away, Vladimir," advised Maria Alexandrovna; "he bores me."

Vladimir Vladimirovich descended a few steps towards the stranger. "Come now, you've annoyed me enough," he said. "Be off. I am in my right. The land is mine and I will not rent it to those rascals of peasants. I uphold the sacred rights of property. A-ha! my fine orator, I can also use big words. Now, off with you. If you preach all night you won't alter my decision. Surely you have not such a high opinion of your own eloquence as all that! If so, you're greatly mistaken. I can do as I like with my own, and the land shall rot if I choose, but not an inch of it goes to the peasants. I have said it. Now, be off with you."

"I am going. Remember, I have warned you."

Noiselessly as he had come he went down the marble steps, through the archway, and into the courtyard. Not a dog barked at him.

Vladimir Vladimirovich sat down and drank off a glass of tea in silence.

"His face looks like that of one of the blessed

apostles," drawled Seraphima Profirovna. "Who is he, Voloda?"

"Some expelled student or something of the sort—a rascal of an anarchist—a jail-bird. Leda, what are you looking at me like that for? I won't allow it. Drink your tea."

Leda rose from the table. "He was right—he was right," she repeated, flushing and paling. "You *cannot* do such a thing, papa. It is awful."

Vladimir Vladimirovich struck his fist upon the table as was his manner when in one of his fits of rage, but Lydia turned swiftly and ran down the steps.

CHAPTER VI

ATTACK

KORSAKOFF, in the coolest of Russian blouses and the broadest of Panama hats, rested on his oars and let his boat glide with the current. Above him the August sun shone triumphantly in a sky from which the morning thunder-clouds had been chased away; and the steppe exhaled the fierce deluge of a few hours ago in a delicate, warm mist.

“Just what I predicted,” thought Petrusha. “Fierce storms in the beginning of August.”

“Look out!” shouted a boy’s clear voice from behind him, and a boat shot between him and the bank.

Korsakoff looked up abstractedly, changed colour, and took off his hat. Lydia was in the boat with her brother.

A few flashes of the dripping oars and the boat was out of sight, hidden by a bend of the river.

Petrusha, with a broad, swinging stroke, came up almost to the curve; then, checking his first instinctive movement, turned round and rowed steadily till he reached the landing-place.

"What an insupportably ridiculous position," he thought. "The girl I mean to marry, if she does n't refuse me, lives just across the river, and I can't even go and see her. Her mother would be glad enough to receive me. But her father—! Well—he's a *chudak!*"

The peasants called him something worse. Again they came, by twos and threes this time, and waited about the house to get speech of one or other of the family. Pavloosha was daily besieged by petitions as he went fishing and boating. He invariably answered in his soft, boyish voice, with his pretty, Lyceum manner: "I will speak to my father as you wish," but would as soon have put his head into a lion's mouth as mention the subject to Vladimir Vladimirovich.

Once or twice a peasant, bolder than the rest, had approached the terrace at the dinner hour, when the ogre was most likely to be found, only to receive a volley of abuse; and once Vladimir Vladimirovich went so far as to threaten an obstinate petitioner with his revolver. The man turned away, muttering.

And meanwhile the time of the early autumn sowing was passing, and the land still lay untouched. Stepàn Krechenko had complained to a member of the Temski, Max had done the same, and both had received the same reply. Vladimir Vladimirovich was in his right, there being no law to force a squire to let his land.

"But it's a crime!" exclaimed Max hotly. "The land lies uncultivated. There was no spring sowing, and the harvest was consequently very poor. And now he refuses to yield the land for the autumn. It means famine. It's inhuman."

"Yes, yes—you are quite right. It's most distressing. Morally, Vladimir Vladimirovich has no right to act as he does. But legally he has. What can I do, Maximilian Ardilionovich?"

And the villagers murmured bitterly against the "*proklatie kaldoon*."

"He should be killed like a dog," muttered one. "I would do it myself if it was n't for my children."

"All the same the children will starve," said another.

"And we kill him. Good. Will that give us the land? By the time the law has set things straight, sowing-time will be over, and some of us will be in prison, and for no good after all.

A plot was at first suggested to seize Pavloosha and, holding him as a hostage, to make terms with his father. But it was abandoned as useless. Of course the wizard would promise all and fulfil nothing, and it was best to have no notary in the affair.

"They are sly, those lawyers, and will set some trap for us without doubt," was the general comment. And so Pavloosha went fishing in peace.

But the heat of just anger flamed into the wild

fires of revengeful hate. There was no longer talk of a reasonable plan to bring about the desired result. Their one wish was to strike at the detested wizard, who looked upon them as something lower than beasts, to break his pride, to make him feel that they—the despised—were masters of his fate.

“The same risk for all,” was the mandate, and the whole village joined in the riot.

They did not wait till night when the doors would be bolted and barred, and the wizard himself most likely in converse with the powers of darkness; but, armed with knives, scythes, sticks, a rusty gun or two, stones, and whips, they swept across the courtyard, beating back the dogs and the frightened servants, rushed through the gateway and up the steps towards the terrace, where the family sat at dinner.

At the sound of the fierce barking of the dogs, Seraphima Profirovna sprang up from her chair with a nervous cry of “*Bofhia moy!*” Madame Gortchnikova dropped her spoon and turned pale, and Lydia and Pavloosha ran to the balustrade.

“Disgraceful!” began Vladimir Vladimirovich, angrily. “I——”

The rose bushes rustled as the armed peasants pushed through the archway.

“Run!” cried Vladimir Vladimirovich, pushing his wife into the house. “Up to the tower—hurry!”

The frightened women flew across the dining-room. Lydia and Pavloosha, pale and frightened, stood in the doorway and looked at their father.

"*Bofhia moy*, Leda, run!" repeated the ogre, distractedly.

The peasants were at the foot of the steps, and a bullet from one of the guns went crashing through the French window, followed by a stone.

"And you, papa?" faltered Leda.

"Ah, *Bofhia moy!*" repeated Gortchnikoff in exasperation, and taking an arm of each of his children, rushed into the house and up the tower stairs, his assailants following. A bullet smashed one of the hall-lamps, a stone struck Gortchnikoff's shoulder, a heavy stick, whirled at his head, fell heavily on the step just below. Panting, he reached the door, which was left ajar, and tried to push his children inside, but they clung to him and dragged him with them, and Lydia slammed the door and took out the key just as the foremost rioters flung themselves against it.

"Let me get at them—the wretches!" stammered the ogre, freeing himself from his children's grasp and feeling for his revolver. Lydia, having no pocket in her muslin dress, passed the key to Pavloosha behind her father's back.

Gortchnikoff's face grew blank. His revolver was not with him. It lay on the table in his study downstairs; another was in his den in the tower which could only be reached by recrossing

the passage crowded by the shouting men who had come to take his life.

"*Kaldoon—kaldoon proklatie!*" called a voice from outside. "Come out, or we'll smoke out your tower like a hornet's nest."

"Voloda! Voloda!" cried a sobbing voice from the musicians' gallery. "Come here—we are in the room up here. It is the safest place. Come."

"Leda—Pavloosha—go to your mother and leave me to deal with these dogs."

The brother and sister took hold of each other's hands and ran across the unfinished parquet, up the narrow staircase into the gallery, where Maria Alexandrovna received them with tears and drew them into the room, in which Seraphima Profirovna knelt praying and sobbing—she had run up-stairs with remarkable agility—and Marusia lay half-unconscious. The room was absolutely bare.

"*Kaldoon—kaldoon proklatie!*" cried the men outside, beating upon the door with the butt-end of their guns, and slashing at it with their knives. Seeing that the key was gone—the small Yale key which can be slipped in and out so quietly,—Vladimir Vladimirovich fastened the door even more securely by means of the chain, and stood with folded arms, thinking what was best to be done.

A bullet—the last—stuck in the panel, and a voice shouted—"An axe—get an axe!"

A dozen men rushed up the stairs. They had stayed behind to secure the steward and the servants to prevent them giving the alarm. They had offered but the faintest show of resistance, while the steward, considering it certainly not worth while to risk his life for such a master, had surrendered, letting himself be bound under protest.

“Smash his instruments—his devilish instruments!” suggested one of the newcomers, and forthwith the rioters rushed into the den—the key was in the lock outside—and flung themselves upon the gramophones.

Vladimir Vladimirovich heard the cry and the rush across the corridor, and guessed what was going on. He mounted to the room behind the gallery, and knocked at the locked door. “It is I,” he said.

Lydia unfastened the door.

“Give me the key,” he said. “I must get at those brutes.”

Pavloosha ran to the window, struck his fist through the glass without waiting to fumble at the stiff fastenings, and dropped the key outside.

“There are twenty or thirty of them outside, papa,” he said. “They would kill you at once.”

“Not before I kill one or two of them,” said the ogre, grimly, clenching his powerful hands. “And is it better to stay here till they burn us out?”

Maria Alexandrovna, sitting on the floor near

Marusia, uttered a wild scream at the words, and staggering to her feet flung herself into her husband's arms. Seraphima Profirovna redoubled her prayers, Lydia turned deathly white, and Pavloosha bit his lips and clenched his hands in the effort to retain a manful composure. He was fourteen.

"There—there—I did n't mean that! Of course, they won't dare to go so far," muttered Gortchnikoff. "If only I had my revolver with me, I would send them flying in a minute. Why did you throw away the key, you young fool?" he asked Pavloosha, sharply.

He was sincerely angry with the boy. He seemed to imagine that his mere presence would strike fear into the hearts of the men; perhaps he was not so far wrong. It is said that Nicolas I., alone and unarmed, facing a wild mob with the command, "On your knees!" cowed the rebels into instant, submissive obedience. But Nicolas I. possessed the superb dignity of a royal tyrant, too disdainful for rage.

The gramophones, smashed into atoms, littered the floor of the den, and, from sheer lust of destruction, the peasants slashed the olive velvet of the chairs, broke open the drawers of the desk, where they found and seized a couple of hundred roubles, smashed the windows and the glass of the bookcases, and rushed back into the corridor to hammer at the locked door.

“Now we shall get at him!” shouted a voice from below, and a lad came rushing up the steps, flourishing an axe.

In another minute sweeping blows were showered upon the oaken panels, and splinters flew in every direction.

“Are you quite out of your minds, brothers?” said a clear voice from the head of the stairs.

CHAPTER VII

A PARLEY

MAX had heard of the riot from one of his own stable-lads, who, crossing the river to visit his sweetheart, had got wind of the affair.

"Don't say anything about it at the house. *Barina* will be frightened, and it's most likely a false alarm," he said as he loosened his boat from its moorings and rowed across to the landing-stage near the old green pavilion, where Minnie had slept in the winter.

The long avenues of the park stretched to the undergrowth beyond, bathed in a golden light by the rays of the setting sun, the birds twittered lazily, and the white towers of the house rose towards a sky of those soft, uncertain tints which precede the glories of sunset.

"Does n't look much like riot," thought Max. But looking towards the terrace he was struck by its deserted air.

"*Dourak! Dourak!*" shouted a hoarse voice as he mounted the steps. The parrot fluttered excitedly on its perch, staring down at the overturned table and the meandering rills of soup.

From upstairs came the muffled sound of blows and shouts.

Max was unarmed, but had he carried a revolver with him he would not have drawn it as he mounted the tower stairs. He understood the men with whom he had to deal.

The blows drowned the noise of his approach, the men were all crowding round the door, and only when he was close behind them did he raise his voice above the tumult. "Are you quite out of your minds?" he asked.

There was a sudden silence, and the men wheeled round and stared at him.

"What are you smashing that door for?" he asked.

For the moment they seemed stricken dumb. The attitude of their questioner was so simple, his brown eyes looked from one to another of them with such calm inquiry that their rage *could* not turn against him.

"Well, you see, *panitch*," explained Stepan Krechenko, slowly, "we want to get at Gortchnikoff. He wants to starve us for spite. You know it, *panitch*."

"And if you get at him and kill him, will you be better off than you are now? Worse, I should say. Arrest, flogging, prison, and penal servitude. That 's what you 'll get by it."

"But he will be dead," said he with the axe, his white teeth gleaming. "We have nothing against

you, *panitch*. We know you spoke for us before the Temski. But it was no good. There is no law against his starving us. We will do without the law."

He swung his axe over his head and brought it down on the door.

"Drop that, Ivan," said Max, with the merest note of command in his voice, "and listen to me, all of you. You know I have always wished you well. What is the use of your killing Gortchnikoff? To begin with, he is a very powerful man, and will most likely kill one or two of you before he is overpowered, and the rest of you will pay dearly for his death. It seems to me clear as God's day that you are committing foolishness. Now let me make terms between you and him. He must swear to give you the land, and you must go away quietly."

A murmur of doubt greeted his words.

"He will swear anything, being in fear of his life, and then give us up to the police." Thus Stepàn Krechenko expressed the general opinion.

"He will not. He shall swear before you upon the Holy Image. No man dare break that oath."

"He is a wizard," murmured a lad.

"And even if he is, the oath is binding," said Max, serenely. "His word to me binds him. Come, Krechenko, you remember Gargarine of Villika Roosāva; he shot himself because he could not pay a bet he had made when he was drunk."

"It is true," said Krechenko, slowly. "A noble may cheat a tradesman, or mock at us peasants,—but he must keep his word to another noble."

"Now listen to me," went on Max, smiling a little in his whimsical way as he felt he was gaining ground. "Suppose you kill me—you'll have to if you are determined to go on with this affair, and it will be easy enough, for I am unarmed,—and then you smash the door and kill Gortchnikoff. What will follow? As I said before, flogging and penal servitude. You can't escape from the police, you know. They are bound to catch you at last. Hunger will drive you into the villages, and there you cannot live without your passports, and you will be caught like foxes in a trap. A losing game, lads. Now let me treat with Gortchnikoff, and I promise you that if he will not swear to give you the land and leave you unpunished for this attack upon him, hushing up any inquiries which may be instituted, I will go away and leave you to do as you like with him. Do you agree to this?"

Stepàn Krechenko drew off his followers to the head of the steps and held a conference.

"We have smashed his instruments and his windows and frightened him, showing him that he is not the god he thought himself. And we shall get the land perhaps, and go unpunished. It is good."

"*Panitch—barin*, I mean,—we consent," he said, coming forward.

Max beat upon the damaged door. "Gortchnikoff!" he cried. "Vladimir Vladimirovich! Are you there?"

Having consoled his family as well as he could, Gortchnikoff had returned to the musicians' gallery, where the blows upon the door below proved to him that his assailants had given up the thought of fire. Looking down desperately upon the empty hall in search of a weapon, he remembered that in the room where André Andréévich had slept, and which could be entered from the central chamber, was a curtain rod which in vigorous hands would make a formidable weapon. He descended and went in search of it. Wrenching it down and tearing the curtain away from it, he went back to the door, standing sufficiently far back to escape being crushed by the fall of the heavy panels. He was determined to die hard, for hate of his assailants and love of his helpless family.

And then the blows suddenly ceased, recommenced, ceased again, and there was the sound of a refined voice—was it young Galovkine's?—and at last the same voice called distinctly, "Gortchnikoff, are you there?"

"I am here. Is that you, Galovkine?"

"Yes. It is I."

The ogre burst into a harsh laugh. "Fine com-

pany for a *dvorianine*. So you are the spokesman of these wretches, are you? My compliments!"

"The madman! He will spoil everything," thought Max, as the men around him muttered angrily.

"For God's sake, think of your wife and daughters and forget your cursèd pride," he said in French.

"No, no, *panitch*. No foreign jargon," interrupted Stepàn Krechenko.

"I cannot answer for the consequences if you refuse to accept the terms I offer you," went on Max, in Russian. "I have given my word to go away without further interference if you refuse. I am alone and unarmed, and the police are miles away. I advise you to yield. You have not only yourself to consider, remember. The door will not hold ten minutes."

"State your terms," said Gortchnikoff, gloomily.

Max drew his letter-case from his pocket, wrote upon a blank leaf, and handed it to Ivan.

"You can read, I know," he said. "Read it aloud."

The lad put down his axe, took the sheet of paper in both hands, and read it out slowly with much stumbling and screwing up of his eyes.

It was a concise statement of the required terms.

"Good!" was the general comment as Ivan handed the paper back to Max, who slipped it under the door.

Gortchnikoff read it, frowning heavily, and went into the guest-room in search of writing materials. The ink was thick and the pen scratchy, and he signed and dated the paper with a shaking hand.

"Come out and swear upon the Holy Image," cried Stepan Krechenko, as the document passed from hand to hand. "We will not touch you."

"I cannot. The door is locked, and my son has thrown away the key."

Ivan picked up his axe with a chuckle.

We must smash the door, *panitch*," he said to Max. "We can't leave him shut up there, you know."

"Wait," cried Krechenko. "He is armed, of course. Speak to him, *barin*. Make him promise not to touch us."

When Max had obtained the required promise, Ivan continued the work of destruction with great relish, and at length the heavy panel split and fell inward, and Vladimir Vladimirovich, his eyes blazing in his sallow face, stepped through the breach.

And the peasants themselves felt, as he swore the required oath before the Holy Image in his pillaged room, that their revenge would not have been so complete had they killed him.

"Now—go," he said, wheeling round upon them.

Max had remained in the corridor, and as the

peasants trooped out of the room he went downstairs.

Stepàn Krechenko caught him up at the foot of the terrace steps.

"You were right, *barin*," he said. "We thank you. And we showed the *kaldoon* something, too. *Zdorova!*"

Late that evening Max sat with Korsakoff on the small verandah, while Minnie played in the study beyond.

Petrusha smoked furiously. "Oh, I say," he said at last. "Why did n't you tell me what was going on, and give me a chance of coming with you? What beastly selfishness!"

Max laughed. "Ah, Petruss, there was no need. Your presence would have been at least a suggestion of force. They only needed a few clear words from some one who understands them."

Petrusha blew smoke-rings towards the roof of vine-leaves.

"What an opportunity lost!" he said, half-mockingly. "Max—Max—you have not an idea of dramatic effect!" Then, with a sudden change of tone: "And now—you are sure there is no further danger?"

"Not a scrap."

Some one came slowly and heavily up the steps, and, standing still as he reached the top, peered into the gloom.

"Vladimir Vladimirovich!" exclaimed Max, rising.

Gortchnikoff came forward. "I am going to my Azovian estate to-morrow," he said, "and before leaving I must thank you for saving more than my life."

Then he saw Petrusha, and silently held out his hand.

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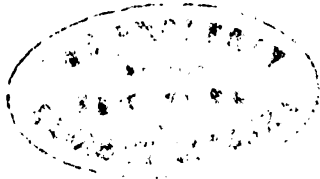
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