

PART SECOND

I

In the conduct of an invented story there are, no doubt, certain proprieties to be observed for the sake of clearness and effect. A man of imagination, however inexperienced in the art of narrative, has his instinct to guide him in the choice of his words, and in the development of the action. A grain of talent excuses many mistakes. But this is not a work of imagination; I have no talent; my excuse for this undertaking lies not in its art, but in its artlessness. Aware of my limitations and strong in the sincerity of my purpose, I would not try (were I able) to invent anything. I push my scruples so far that I would not even invent a transition.

Dropping then Mr. Razumov's record at the point where Councillor Mikulin's question "Where to?" comes in with the force of an insoluble problem, I shall simply say that I made the acquaintance of these ladies about six months before that time. By "these ladies" I mean, of course, the mother and the sister of the unfortunate Haldin.

By what arguments he had induced his mother to sell their little property and go abroad for an indefinite time, I cannot tell precisely. I have an idea that Mrs. Haldin, at her son's wish, would have set fire to her house and emigrated to the moon without any sign of surprise or apprehension; and that Miss Haldin--Nathalie, caressingly Nataalka--would have given her assent to the scheme.

Their proud devotion to that young man became clear to me in a very short time. Following his directions they went straight to Switzerland--to Zurich--where they remained the best part of a year. From Zurich, which they did not like, they came to Geneva. A friend of mine in Lausanne, a lecturer in history at the University (he had married a Russian lady, a distant connection of Mrs. Haldin's), wrote to me suggesting I should call on these ladies. It was a very kindly meant business suggestion. Miss Haldin wished to go through a course of reading the best English authors with a competent teacher.

Mrs. Haldin received me very kindly. Her bad French, of which she was smilingly conscious, did away with the formality of the first interview. She was a tall woman in a black silk dress. A wide brow, regular features, and delicately cut lips, testified to her past beauty. She sat upright in an easy chair and in a rather

weak, gentle voice told me that her Nataalka simply thirsted after knowledge. Her thin hands were lying on her lap, her facial immobility had in it something monachal. "In Russia," she went on, "all knowledge was tainted with falsehood. Not chemistry and all that, but education generally," she explained. The Government corrupted the teaching for its own purposes. Both her children felt that. Her Nataalka had obtained a diploma of a Superior School for Women and her son was a student at the St. Petersburg University. He had a brilliant intellect, a most noble unselfish nature, and he was the oracle of his comrades. Early next year, she hoped he would join them and they would then go to Italy together. In any other country but their own she would have been certain of a great future for a man with the extraordinary abilities and the lofty character of her son--but in Russia....

The young lady sitting by the window turned her head and said--

"Come, mother. Even with us things change with years."

Her voice was deep, almost harsh, and yet caressing in its harshness. She had a dark complexion, with red lips and a full figure. She gave the impression of strong vitality. The old lady sighed.

"You are both young--you two. It is easy for you to hope. But I, too, am not hopeless. Indeed, how could I be with a son like this."

I addressed Miss Haldin, asking her what authors she wished to read. She directed upon me her grey eyes shaded by black eyelashes, and I became aware, notwithstanding my years, how attractive physically her personality could be to a man capable of appreciating in a woman something else than the mere grace of femininity. Her glance was as direct and trustful as that of a young man yet unspoiled by the world's wise lessons. And it was intrepid, but in this intrepidity there was nothing aggressive. A naive yet thoughtful assurance is a better definition. She had reflected already (in Russia the young begin to think early), but she had never known deception as yet because obviously she had never yet fallen under the sway of passion. She was--to look at her was enough--very capable of being roused by an idea or simply by a person. At least, so I judged with I believe an unbiassed mind; for clearly my person could not be the person--and as to my ideas!...

We became excellent friends in the course of our reading. It was very pleasant. Without fear of provoking a smile, I shall confess that I became very much attached to that young girl. At the end of four months I told her that now she could very well go on reading English by herself. It was time for the teacher to depart. My pupil looked unpleasantly surprised.

Mrs. Haldin, with her immobility of feature and kindly expression of the eyes, uttered from her armchair in her uncertain French, "Mais l'ami reviendra." And so it was settled. I returned--not four times a week as before, but pretty frequently. In the autumn we made some short excursions together in company with other Russians. My friendship with these ladies gave me a standing in the Russian colony which otherwise I could not have had.

The day I saw in the papers the news of Mr. de P---'s assassination--it was a Sunday--I met the two ladies in the street and walked with them for some distance. Mrs. Haldin wore a heavy grey cloak, I remember, over her black silk dress, and her fine eyes met mine with a very quiet expression.

"We have been to the late service," she said. "Natalka came with me. Her girlfriends, the students here, of course don't.... With us in Russia the church is so identified with oppression, that it seems almost necessary when one wishes to be free in this life, to give up all hope of a future existence. But I cannot give up praying for my son."

She added with a sort of stony grimness, colouring slightly, and in French, "Ce n'est peut etre qu'une habitude." ("It may be only habit.")

Miss Haldin was carrying the prayer-book. She did not glance at her mother.

"You and Victor are both profound believers," she said.

I communicated to them the news from their country which I had just read in a cafe. For a whole minute we walked together fairly briskly in silence. Then Mrs. Haldin murmured--

"There will be more trouble, more persecutions for this. They may be even closing the University. There is neither peace nor rest in Russia for one but in the grave.

"Yes. The way is hard," came from the daughter, looking straight before her at the Chain of Jura covered with snow, like a white wall closing the end of the street. "But concord is not so very far off."

"That is what my children think," observed Mrs. Haldin to me.

I did not conceal my feeling that these were strange times to talk of concord. Nathalie Haldin surprised me by saying, as if she had thought very much on the subject, that the occidentals did not understand the situation. She was very calm and youthfully superior.

"You think it is a class conflict, or a conflict of interests, as social contests are with you in Europe. But it is not that at all. It is something quite different."

"It is quite possible that I don't understand," I admitted.

That propensity of lifting every problem from the plane of the understandable by means of some sort of mystic expression, is very Russian. I knew her well enough to have discovered her scorn for all the practical forms of political liberty known to the western world. I suppose one must be a Russian to understand Russian simplicity, a terrible corroding simplicity in which mystic phrases clothe a naive and hopeless cynicism. I think sometimes that the psychological secret of the profound difference of that people consists in this, that they detest life, the irremediable life of the earth as it is, whereas we westerners cherish it with perhaps an equal exaggeration of its sentimental value. But this is a digression indeed....

I helped these ladies into the tramcar and they asked me to call in the afternoon. At least Mrs. Haldin asked me as she climbed up, and her Nataalka smiled down at the dense westerner indulgently from the rear platform of the moving car. The light of the clear wintry forenoon was softened in her grey eyes.

Mr. Razumov's record, like the open book of fate, revives for me the memory of that day as something startlingly pitiless in its freedom from all forebodings. Victor Haldin was still with the living, but with the living whose only contact with life is the expectation of death. He must have been already referring to the last of his earthly affections, the hours of that obstinate silence, which for him was to be prolonged into eternity. That afternoon the ladies entertained a good many of their compatriots--more than was usual for them to receive at one time; and the drawing-room on the ground floor of a large house on the Boulevard des Philosophes was very much crowded.

I outstayed everybody; and when I rose Miss Haldin stood up too. I took her hand and was moved to revert to that morning's conversation in the street.

"Admitting that we occidentals do not understand the character of your..." I began.

It was as if she had been prepared for me by some mysterious fore-knowledge. She checked me gently--

"Their impulses--their..." she sought the proper expression and found it, but in French..."their mouvements d'ame."

Her voice was not much above a whisper.

"Very well," I said. "But still we are looking at a conflict. You say it is not a conflict of classes and not a conflict of interests. Suppose I admitted that. Are antagonistic ideas then to be reconciled more easily--can they be cemented with blood and violence into that concord which you proclaim to be so near?"

She looked at me searchingly with her clear grey eyes, without answering my reasonable question--my obvious, my unanswerable question.

"It is inconceivable," I added, with something like annoyance.

"Everything is inconceivable," she said. "The whole world is inconceivable to the strict logic of ideas. And yet the world exists to our senses, and we exist in it. There must be a necessity superior to our conceptions. It is a very miserable and a very false thing to belong to the majority. We Russians shall find some better form of national freedom than an artificial conflict of parties--which is wrong because it is a conflict and contemptible because it is artificial. It is left for us Russians to discover a better way."

Mrs. Haldin had been looking out of the window. She turned upon me the almost lifeless beauty of her face, and the living benign glance of her big dark eyes.

"That's what my children think," she declared.

"I suppose," I addressed Miss Haldin, "that you will be shocked if I tell you that I haven't understood--I won't say a single word; I've understood all the words.... But what can be this era of disembodied concord you are looking forward to. Life is a thing of form. It has its plastic shape and a definite intellectual aspect. The most idealistic conceptions of love and forbearance must be clothed in flesh as it were before they can be made understandable."

I took my leave of Mrs. Haldin, whose beautiful lips never stirred. She smiled with her eyes only. Nathalie Haldin went with me as far as the door, very amiable.

"Mother imagines that I am the slavish echo of my brother Victor. It is not so. He understands me better than I can understand him. When he joins us and you come to know him you will see what an exceptional soul it is." She paused. "He is not a strong man in the conventional sense, you know," she added. "But his character is without a flaw."

"I believe that it will not be difficult for me to make friends with your brother

Victor."

"Don't expect to understand him quite," she said, a little maliciously. "He is not at all--at all--western at bottom."

And on this unnecessary warning I left the room with another bow in the doorway to Mrs. Haldin in her armchair by the window. The shadow of autocracy all unperceived by me had already fallen upon the Boulevard des Philosophes, in the free, independent and democratic city of Geneva, where there is a quarter called "La Petite Russie." Whenever two Russians come together, the shadow of autocracy is with them, tinging their thoughts, their views, their most intimate feelings, their private life, their public utterances--haunting the secret of their silences.

What struck me next in the course of a week or so was the silence of these ladies. I used to meet them walking in the public garden near the University. They greeted me with their usual friendliness, but I could not help noticing their taciturnity. By that time it was generally known that the assassin of M. de P--- had been caught, judged, and executed. So much had been declared officially to the news agencies. But for the world at large he remained anonymous. The official secrecy had withheld his name from the public. I really cannot imagine for what reason.

One day I saw Miss Haldin walking alone in the main valley of the Bastions under the naked trees.

"Mother is not very well," she explained.

As Mrs. Haldin had, it seemed, never had a day's illness in her life, this indisposition was disquieting. It was nothing definite, too.

"I think she is fretting because we have not heard from my brother for rather a long time."

"No news--good news," I said cheerfully, and we began to walk slowly side by side.

"Not in Russia," she breathed out so low that I only just caught the words. I looked at her with more attention.

"You too are anxious?"

She admitted after a moment of hesitation that she was.

"It is really such a long time since we heard...."

And before I could offer the usual banal suggestions she confided in me.

"Oh! But it is much worse than that. I wrote to a family we know in Petersburg. They had not seen him for more than a month. They thought he was already with us. They were even offended a little that he should have left Petersburg without calling on them. The husband of the lady went at once to his lodgings. Victor had left there and they did not know his address."

I remember her catching her breath rather pitifully. Her brother had not been seen at lectures for a very long time either. He only turned up now and then at the University gate to ask the porter for his letters. And the gentleman friend was told that the student Haldin did not come to claim the last two letters for him. But the police came to inquire if the student Haldin ever received any correspondence at the University and took them away.

"My two last letters," she said.

We faced each other. A few snow-flakes fluttered under the naked boughs. The sky was dark.

"What do you think could have happened?" I asked.

Her shoulders moved slightly.

"One can never tell--in Russia."

I saw then the shadow of autocracy lying upon Russian lives in their submission or their revolt. I saw it touch her handsome open face nestled in a fur collar and darken her clear eyes that shone upon me brilliantly grey in the murky light of a beclouded, inclement afternoon.

"Let us move on," she said. "It is cold standing--to-day."

She shuddered a little and stamped her little feet. We moved briskly to the end of the alley and back to the great gates of the garden.

"Have you told your mother?" I ventured to ask.

"No. Not yet. I came out to walk off the impression of this letter."

I heard a rustle of paper somewhere. It came from her muff. She had the letter

with her in there.

"What is it that you are afraid of?" I asked.

To us Europeans of the West, all ideas of political plots and conspiracies seem childish, crude inventions for the theatre or a novel. I did not like to be more definite in my inquiry.

"For us--for my mother specially, what I am afraid of is incertitude. People do disappear. Yes, they do disappear. I leave you to imagine what it is--the cruelty of the dumb weeks--months--years! This friend of ours has abandoned his inquiries when he heard of the police getting hold of the letters. I suppose he was afraid of compromising himself. He has a wife and children--and why should he, after all.... Moreover, he is without influential connections and not rich. What could he do?... Yes, I am afraid of silence--for my poor mother. She won't be able to bear it. For my brother I am afraid of..." she became almost indistinct, "of anything."

We were now near the gate opposite the theatre. She raised her voice.

"But lost people do turn up even in Russia. Do you know what my last hope is? Perhaps the next thing we know, we shall see him walking into our rooms."

I raised my hat and she passed out of the gardens, graceful and strong, after a slight movement of the head to me, her hands in the muff, crumpling the cruel Petersburg letter.

On returning home I opened the newspaper I receive from London, and glancing down the correspondence from Russia--not the telegrams but the correspondence--the first thing that caught my eye was the name of Haldin. Mr. de P---'s death was no longer an actuality, but the enterprising correspondent was proud of having ferreted out some unofficial information about that fact of modern history. He had got hold of Haldin's name, and had picked up the story of the midnight arrest in the street. But the sensation from a journalistic point of view was already well in the past. He did not allot to it more than twenty lines out of a full column. It was quite enough to give me a sleepless night. I perceived that it would have been a sort of treason to let Miss Haldin come without preparation upon that journalistic discovery which would infallibly be reproduced on the morrow by French and Swiss newspapers. I had a very bad time of it till the morning, wakeful with nervous worry and night-marish with the feeling of being mixed up with something theatrical and morbidly affected. The incongruity of such a complication in those two women's lives was sensible to me all night in the form of absolute anguish. It seemed due to their refined simplicity that it should remain concealed from them for ever. Arriving at an unconscionably early hour at

the door of their apartment, I felt as if I were about to commit an act of vandalism....

The middle-aged servant woman led me into the drawing-room where there was a duster on a chair and a broom leaning against the centre table. The motes danced in the sunshine; I regretted I had not written a letter instead of coming myself, and was thankful for the brightness of the day. Miss Haldin in a plain black dress came lightly out of her mother's room with a fixed uncertain smile on her lips.

I pulled the paper out of my pocket. I did not imagine that a number of the Standard could have the effect of Medusa's head. Her face went stony in a moment--her eyes--her limbs. The most terrible thing was that being stony she remained alive. One was conscious of her palpitating heart. I hope she forgave me the delay of my clumsy circumlocution. It was not very prolonged; she could not have kept so still from head to foot for more than a second or two; and then I heard her draw a breath. As if the shock had paralysed her moral resistance, and affected the firmness of her muscles, the contours of her face seemed to have given way. She was frightfully altered. She looked aged--ruined. But only for a moment. She said with decision--

"I am going to tell my mother at once."

"Would that be safe in her state?" I objected.

"What can be worse than the state she has been in for the last month? We understand this in another way. The crime is not at his door. Don't imagine I am defending him before you."

She went to the bedroom door, then came back to ask me in a low murmur not to go till she returned. For twenty interminable minutes not a sound reached me. At last Miss Haldin came out and walked across the room with her quick light step. When she reached the armchair she dropped into it heavily as if completely exhausted.

Mrs. Haldin, she told me, had not shed a tear. She was sitting up in bed, and her immobility, her silence, were very alarming. At last she lay down gently and had motioned her daughter away.

"She will call me in presently," added Miss Haldin. "I left a bell near the bed."

I confess that my very real sympathy had no standpoint. The Western readers for whom this story is written will understand what I mean. It was, if I may say so,

the want of experience. Death is a remorseless spoliator. The anguish of irreparable loss is familiar to us all. There is no life so lonely as to be safe against that experience. But the grief I had brought to these two ladies had gruesome associations. It had the associations of bombs and gallows--a lurid, Russian colouring which made the complexion of my sympathy uncertain.

I was grateful to Miss Haldin for not embarrassing me by an outward display of deep feeling. I admired her for that wonderful command over herself, even while I was a little frightened at it. It was the stillness of a great tension. What if it should suddenly snap? Even the door of Mrs. Haldin's room, with the old mother alone in there, had a rather awful aspect.

Nathalie Haldin murmured sadly--

"I suppose you are wondering what my feelings are?"

Essentially that was true. It was that very wonder which unsettled my sympathy of a dense Occidental. I could get hold of nothing but of some commonplace phrases, those futile phrases that give the measure of our impotence before each other's trials I mumbled something to the effect that, for the young, life held its hopes and compensations. It held duties too--but of that I was certain it was not necessary to remind her.

She had a handkerchief in her hands and pulled at it nervously.

"I am not likely to forget my mother," she said. "We used to be three. Now we are two--two women. She's not so very old. She may live quite a long time yet. What have we to look for in the future? For what hope and what consolation?"

"You must take a wider view," I said resolutely, thinking that with this exceptional creature this was the right note to strike. She looked at me steadily for a moment, and then the tears she had been keeping down flowed unrestrained. She jumped up and stood in the window with her back to me.

I slipped away without attempting even to approach her. Next day I was told at the door that Mrs. Haldin was better. The middle-aged servant remarked that a lot of people--Russians--had called that day, but Miss Haldin had not seen anybody. A fortnight later, when making my daily call, I was asked in and found Mrs. Haldin sitting in her usual place by the window.

At first one would have thought that nothing was changed. I saw across the room the familiar profile, a little sharper in outline and overspread by a uniform pallor as might have been expected in an invalid. But no disease could have accounted

for the change in her black eyes, smiling no longer with gentle irony. She raised them as she gave me her hand. I observed the three weeks' old number of the Standard folded with the correspondence from Russia uppermost, lying on a little table by the side of the armchair. Mrs. Haldin's voice was startlingly weak and colourless. Her first words to me framed a question.

"Has there been anything more in papers?"

I released her long emaciated hand, shook my head negatively, and sat down.

"The English press is wonderful. Nothing can be kept secret from it, and all the world must hear. Only our Russian news is not always easy to understand. Not always easy.... But English mothers do not look for news like that...."

She laid her hand on the newspaper and took it away again. I said--

"We too have had tragic times in our history."

"A long time ago. A very long time ago."

"Yes."

"There are nations that have made their bargain with fate," said Miss Haldin, who had approached us. "We need not envy them."

"Why this scorn?" I asked gently. "It may be that our bargain was not a very lofty one. But the terms men and nations obtain from Fate are hallowed by the price."

Mrs. Haldin turned her head away and looked out of the window for a time, with that new, sombre, extinct gaze of her sunken eyes which so completely made another woman of her.

"That Englishman, this correspondent," she addressed me suddenly, "do you think it is possible that he knew my son?"

To this strange question I could only say that it was possible of course. She saw my surprise.

"If one knew what sort of man he was one could perhaps write to him," she murmured.

"Mother thinks," explained Miss Haldin, standing between us, with one hand resting on the back of my chair, "that my poor brother perhaps did not try to save

himself."

I looked up at Miss Haldin in sympathetic consternation, but Miss Haldin was looking down calmly at her mother. The latter said--

"We do not know the address of any of his friends. Indeed, we know nothing of his Petersburg comrades. He had a multitude of young friends, only he never spoke much of them. One could guess that they were his disciples and that they idolized him. But he was so modest. One would think that with so many devoted...."

She averted her head again and looked down the Boulevard des Philosophes, a singularly arid and dusty thoroughfare, where nothing could be seen at the moment but two dogs, a little girl in a pinafore hopping on one leg, and in the distance a workman wheeling a bicycle.

"Even amongst the Apostles of Christ there was found a Judas," she whispered as if to herself, but with the evident intention to be heard by me.

The Russian visitors assembled in little knots, conversed amongst themselves meantime, in low murmurs, and with brief glances in our direction. It was a great contrast to the usual loud volubility of these gatherings. Miss Haldin followed me into the ante-room.

"People will come," she said. "We cannot shut the door in their faces."

While I was putting on my overcoat she began to talk to me of her mother. Poor Mrs. Haldin was fretting after more news. She wanted to go on hearing about her unfortunate son. She could not make up her mind to abandon him quietly to the dumb unknown. She would persist in pursuing him in there through the long days of motionless silence face to face with the empty Boulevard des Philosophes. She could not understand why he had not escaped--as so many other revolutionists and conspirators had managed to escape in other instances of that kind. It was really inconceivable that the means of secret revolutionary organisations should have failed so inexcusably to preserve her son. But in reality the inconceivable that staggered her mind was nothing but the cruel audacity of Death passing over her head to strike at that young and precious heart.

Miss Haldin mechanically, with an absorbed look, handed me my hat. I understood from her that the poor woman was possessed by the sombre and simple idea that her son must have perished because he did not want to be saved. It could not have been that he despaired of his country's future. That was impossible. Was it possible that his mother and sister had not known how to merit his confidence; and that, after having done what he was compelled to do,

his spirit became crushed by an intolerable doubt, his mind distracted by a sudden mistrust.

I was very much shocked by this piece of ingenuity.

"Our three lives were like that!" Miss Haldin twined the fingers of both her hands together in demonstration, then separated them slowly, looking straight into my face. "That's what poor mother found to torment herself and me with, for all the years to come," added the strange girl. At that moment her indefinable charm was revealed to me in the conjunction of passion and stoicism. I imagined what her life was likely to be by the side of Mrs. Haldin's terrible immobility, inhabited by that fixed idea. But my concern was reduced to silence by my ignorance of her modes of feeling. Difference of nationality is a terrible obstacle for our complex Western natures. But Miss Haldin probably was too simple to suspect my embarrassment. She did not wait for me to say anything, but as if reading my thoughts on my face she went on courageously--

"At first poor mother went numb, as our peasants say; then she began to think and she will go on now thinking and thinking in that unfortunate strain. You see yourself how cruel that is...."

I never spoke with greater sincerity than when I agreed with her that it would be deplorable in the highest degree. She took an anxious breath.

"But all these strange details in the English paper," she exclaimed suddenly. "What is the meaning of them? I suppose they are true? But is it not terrible that my poor brother should be caught wandering alone, as if in despair, about the streets at night...."

We stood so close to each other in the dark anteroom that I could see her biting her lower lip to suppress a dry sob. After a short pause she said--

"I suggested to mother that he may have been betrayed by some false friend or simply by some cowardly creature. It may be easier for her to believe that."

I understood now the poor woman's whispered allusion to Judas.

"It may be easier," I admitted, admiring inwardly the directness and the subtlety of the girl's outlook. She was dealing with life as it was made for her by the political conditions of her country. She faced cruel realities, not morbid imaginings of her own making. I could not defend myself from a certain feeling of respect when she added simply--

"Time they say can soften every sort of bitterness. But I cannot believe that it has any power over remorse. It is better that mother should think some person guilty of Victor's death, than that she should connect it with a weakness of her son or a shortcoming of her own."

"But you, yourself, don't suppose that...." I began.

She compressed her lips and shook her head. She harboured no evil thoughts against any one, she declared--and perhaps nothing that happened was unnecessary. On these words, pronounced low and sounding mysterious in the half obscurity of the ante-room, we parted with an expressive and warm handshake. The grip of her strong, shapely hand had a seductive frankness, a sort of exquisite virility. I do not know why she should have felt so friendly to me. It may be that she thought I understood her much better than I was able to do. The most precise of her sayings seemed always to me to have enigmatical prolongations vanishing somewhere beyond my reach. I am reduced to suppose that she appreciated my attention and my silence. The attention she could see was quite sincere, so that the silence could not be suspected of coldness. It seemed to satisfy her. And it is to be noted that if she confided in me it was clearly not with the expectation of receiving advice, for which, indeed she never asked.