

XI. ONE MARK ONLY

The year of mourning over, Grandmamma recovered a little from her grief, and once more took to receiving occasional guests, especially children of the same age as ourselves.

On the 13th of December--Lubotshka's birthday--the Princess Kornakoff and her daughters, with Madame Valakhin, Sonetchka, Ilinka Grap, and the two younger Iwins, arrived at our house before luncheon.

Though we could hear the sounds of talking, laughter, and movements going on in the drawing-room, we could not join the party until our morning lessons were finished. The table of studies in the schoolroom said, "Lundi, de 2 a 3, maitre d'Histoire et de Geographie," and this infernal maitre d'Histoire we must await, listen to, and see the back of before we could gain our liberty. Already it was twenty minutes past two, and nothing was to be heard of the tutor, nor yet anything to be seen of him in the street, although I kept looking up and down it with the greatest impatience and with an emphatic longing never to see the maitre again.

"I believe he is not coming to-day," said Woloda, looking up for a moment from his lesson-book.

"I hope he is not, please the Lord!" I answered, but in a despondent tone. "Yet there he DOES come, I believe, all the same!"

"Not he! Why, that is a GENTLEMAN," said Woloda, likewise looking out of the window, "Let us wait till half-past two, and then ask St. Jerome if we may put away our books."

"Yes, and wish them au revoir," I added, stretching my arms, with the book clasped in my hands, over my head. Having hitherto idled away my time, I now opened the book at the place where the lesson was to begin, and started to learn it. It was long and difficult, and, moreover, I was in the mood when one's thoughts refuse to be arrested by anything at all. Consequently I made no progress. After our last lesson in history (which always seemed to me a peculiarly arduous and wearisome subject) the history master had complained to St. Jerome of me because only two good marks stood to my credit in the register--a very small total. St. Jerome had then told me that if I failed to gain less than THREE marks at the next lesson I should be severely punished. The next lesson was now imminent, and I confess that I felt a little nervous.

So absorbed, however, did I become in my reading that the sound of goloshes being taken off in the ante-room came upon me almost as a shock. I had just time to look up when there appeared in the doorway the servile and (to me) very disgusting face and form of the master, clad in a blue frockcoat with brass buttons.

Slowly he set down his hat and books and adjusted the folds of his coat (as though such a thing were necessary!), and seated himself in his

place.

"Well, gentlemen," he said, rubbing his hands, "let us first of all repeat the general contents of the last lesson: after which I will proceed to narrate the succeeding events of the middle ages."

This meant "Say over the last lesson." While Woloda was answering the master with the entire ease and confidence which come of knowing a subject well, I went aimlessly out on to the landing, and, since I was not allowed to go downstairs, what more natural than that I should involuntarily turn towards the alcove on the landing? Yet before I had time to establish myself in my usual coign of vantage behind the door I found myself pounced upon by Mimi--always the cause of my misfortunes!

"YOU here?" she said, looking severely, first at myself, and then at the maidservants' door, and then at myself again.

I felt thoroughly guilty, firstly, because I was not in the schoolroom, and secondly, because I was in a forbidden place. So I remained silent, and, dropping my head, assumed a touching expression of contrition.

"Indeed, this is TOO bad!" Mimi went on, "What are you doing here?"

Still I said nothing.

"Well, it shall not rest where it is," she added, tapping the banister

with her yellow fingers. "I shall inform the Countess."

It was five minutes to three when I re-entered the schoolroom. The master, as though oblivious of my presence or absence, was explaining the new lesson to Woloda. When he had finished doing this, and had put his books together (while Woloda went into the other room to fetch his ticket), the comforting idea occurred to me that perhaps the whole thing was over now, and that the master had forgotten me.

But suddenly he turned in my direction with a malicious smile, and said as he rubbed his hands anew, "I hope you have learnt your lesson?"

"Yes," I replied.

"Would you be so kind, then, as to tell me something about St. Louis' Crusade?" he went on, balancing himself on his chair and looking gravely at his feet. "Firstly, tell me something about the reasons which induced the French king to assume the cross" (here he raised his eyebrows and pointed to the inkstand); "then explain to me the general characteristics of the Crusade" (here he made a sweeping gesture with his hand, as though to seize hold of something with it); "and lastly, expound to me the influence of this Crusade upon the European states in general" (drawing the copy books to the left side of the table) "and upon the French state in particular" (drawing one of them to the right, and inclining his head in the same direction).

I swallowed a few times, coughed, bent forward, and was silent. Then, taking a pen from the table, I began to pick it to pieces, yet still said nothing.

"Allow me the pen--I shall want it," said the master. "Well?"

"Louis the-er-Saint was-was-a very good and wise king."

"What?"

"King, He took it into his head to go to Jerusalem, and handed over the reins of government to his mother."

"What was her name?"

"B-b-b-lanka."

"What? Belanka?"

I laughed in a rather forced manner.

"Well, is that all you know?" he asked again, smiling.

I had nothing to lose now, so I began chattering the first thing that came into my head. The master remained silent as he gathered together the remains of the pen which I had left strewn about the table, looked

gravely past my ear at the wall, and repeated from time to time, "Very well, very well." Though I was conscious that I knew nothing whatever and was expressing myself all wrong, I felt much hurt at the fact that he never either corrected or interrupted me.

"What made him think of going to Jerusalem?" he asked at last, repeating some words of my own.

"Because--because--that is to say--"

My confusion was complete, and I relapsed into silence, I felt that, even if this disgusting history master were to go on putting questions to me, and gazing inquiringly into my face, for a year, I should never be able to enunciate another syllable. After staring at me for some three minutes, he suddenly assumed a mournful cast of countenance, and said in an agitated voice to Woloda (who was just re-entering the room):

"Allow me the register. I will write my remarks."

He opened the book thoughtfully, and in his fine caligraphy marked FIVE for Woloda for diligence, and the same for good behaviour. Then, resting his pen on the line where my report was to go, he looked at me and reflected. Suddenly his hand made a decisive movement and, behold, against my name stood a clearly-marked ONE, with a full stop after it! Another movement and in the behaviour column there stood another one and another full stop! Quietly closing the book, the master then rose, and

moved towards the door as though unconscious of my look of entreaty, despair, and reproach.

"Michael Lavionitch!" I said.

"No!" he replied, as though knowing beforehand what I was about to say.

"It is impossible for you to learn in that way. I am not going to earn my money for nothing."

He put on his goloshes and cloak, and then slowly tied a scarf about his neck. To think that he could care about such trifles after what had just happened to me! To him it was all a mere stroke of the pen, but to me it meant the direst misfortune.

"Is the lesson over?" asked St. Jerome, entering.

"Yes."

"And was the master pleased with you?"

"Yes."

"How many marks did he give you?"

"Five."

"And to Nicholas?"

I was silent.

"I think four," said Woloda. His idea was to save me for at least today.

If punishment there must be, it need not be awarded while we had guests.

"Voyons, Messieurs!" (St. Jerome was forever saying "Voyons!") "Faites votre toilette, et descendons."