

XII. THE KEY

We had hardly descended and greeted our guests when luncheon was announced. Papa was in the highest of spirits since for some time past he had been winning. He had presented Lubotshka with a silver tea service, and suddenly remembered, after luncheon, that he had forgotten a box of bonbons which she was to have too.

"Why send a servant for it? YOU had better go, Koko," he said to me jestingly. "The keys are in the tray on the table, you know. Take them, and with the largest one open the second drawer on the right. There you will find the box of bonbons. Bring it here."

"Shall I get you some cigars as well?" said I, knowing that he always smoked after luncheon.

"Yes, do; but don't touch anything else."

I found the keys, and was about to carry out my orders, when I was seized with a desire to know what the smallest of the keys on the bunch belonged to.

On the table I saw, among many other things, a padlocked portfolio, and at once felt curious to see if that was what the key fitted. My experiment was crowned with success. The portfolio opened and disclosed a number of papers. Curiosity so strongly urged me also to ascertain

what those papers contained that the voice of conscience was stilled, and I began to read their contents. . . .

My childish feeling of unlimited respect for my elders, especially for Papa, was so strong within me that my intellect involuntarily refused to draw any conclusions from what I had seen. I felt that Papa was living in a sphere completely apart from, incomprehensible by, and unattainable for, me, as well as one that was in every way excellent, and that any attempt on my part to criticise the secrets of his life would constitute something like sacrilege.

For this reason, the discovery which I made from Papa's portfolio left no clear impression upon my mind, but only a dim consciousness that I had done wrong. I felt ashamed and confused.

The feeling made me eager to shut the portfolio again as quickly as possible, but it seemed as though on this unlucky day I was destined to experience every possible kind of adversity. I put the key back into the padlock and turned it round, but not in the right direction. Thinking that the portfolio was now locked, I pulled at the key and, oh horror! found my hand come away with only the top half of the key in it! In vain did I try to put the two halves together, and to extract the portion that was sticking in the padlock. At last I had to resign myself to the dreadful thought that I had committed a new crime--one which would be discovered to-day as soon as ever Papa returned to his study! First of all, Mimi's accusation on the staircase, and then that one mark, and

then this key! Nothing worse could happen now. This very evening I should be assailed successively by Grandmamma (because of Mimi's denunciation), by St. Jerome (because of the solitary mark), and by Papa (because of the matter of this key)--yes, all in one evening!

"What on earth is to become of me? What have I done?" I exclaimed as I paced the soft carpet. "Well," I went on with sudden determination, "what MUST come, MUST--that's all;" and, taking up the bonbons and the cigars, I ran back to the other part of the house.

The fatalistic formula with which I had concluded (and which was one that I often heard Nicola utter during my childhood) always produced in me, at the more difficult crises of my life, a momentarily soothing, beneficial effect. Consequently, when I re-entered the drawing-room, I was in a rather excited, unnatural mood, yet one that was perfectly cheerful.