

XVI. "KEEP ON GRINDING, AND YOU'LL HAVE FLOUR"

I PASSED the night in the store-room, and nothing further happened, except that on the following morning--a Sunday--I was removed to a small chamber adjoining the schoolroom, and once more shut up. I began to hope that my punishment was going to be limited to confinement, and found my thoughts growing calmer under the influence of a sound, soft sleep, the clear sunlight playing upon the frost crystals of the windowpanes, and the familiar noises in the street.

Nevertheless, solitude gradually became intolerable. I wanted to move about, and to communicate to some one all that was lying upon my heart, but not a living creature was near me. The position was the more unpleasant because, willy-nilly, I could hear St. Jerome walking about in his room, and softly whistling some hackneyed tune. Somehow, I felt convinced that he was whistling not because he wanted to, but because he knew it annoyed me.

At two o'clock, he and Woloda departed downstairs, and Nicola brought me up some luncheon. When I told him what I had done and what was awaiting me he said:

"Pshaw, sir! Don't be alarmed. 'Keep on grinding, and you'll have flour.'"

Although this expression (which also in later days has more than once

helped me to preserve my firmness of mind) brought me a little comfort, the fact that I received, not bread and water only, but a whole luncheon, and even dessert, gave me much to think about. If they had sent me no dessert, it would have meant that my punishment was to be limited to confinement; whereas it was now evident that I was looked upon as not yet punished--that I was only being kept away from the others, as an evil-doer, until the due time of punishment. While I was still debating the question, the key of my prison turned, and St. Jerome entered with a severe, official air.

"Come down and see your Grandmamma," he said without looking at me.

I should have liked first to have brushed my jacket, since it was covered with dust, but St. Jerome said that that was quite unnecessary, since I was in such a deplorable moral condition that my exterior was not worth considering. As he led me through the salon, Katenka, Lubotshka, and Woloda looked at me with much the same expression as we were wont to look at the convicts who on certain days filed past my grandmother's house. Likewise, when I approached Grandmamma's arm-chair to kiss her hand, she withdrew it, and thrust it under her mantilla.

"Well, my dear," she began after a long pause, during which she regarded me from head to foot with the kind of expression which makes one uncertain where to look or what to do, "I must say that you seem to value my love very highly, and afford me great consolation." Then she went on, with an emphasis on each word, "Monsieur St. Jerome, who, at my

request, undertook your education, says that he can no longer remain in the house. And why? Simply because of you." Another pause ensued. Presently she continued in a tone which clearly showed that her speech had been prepared beforehand, "I had hoped that you would be grateful for all his care, and for all the trouble that he has taken with you, that you would have appreciated his services; but you--you baby, you silly boy!--you actually dare to raise your hand against him! Very well, very good. I am beginning to think that you cannot understand kind treatment, but require to be treated in a very different and humiliating fashion. Go now directly and beg his pardon," she added in a stern and peremptory tone as she pointed to St. Jerome, "Do you hear me?"

I followed the direction of her finger with my eye, but on that member alighting upon St. Jerome's coat, I turned my head away, and once more felt my heart beating violently as I remained where I was.

"What? Did you not hear me when I told you what to do?"

I was trembling all over, but I would not stir.

"Koko," went on my grandmother, probably divining my inward sufferings, "Koko," she repeated in a voice tender rather than harsh, "is this you?"

"Grandmamma, I cannot beg his pardon for--" and I stopped suddenly, for I felt the next word refuse to come for the tears that were choking me.

"But I ordered you, I begged of you, to do so. What is the matter with you?"

"I-I-I will not--I cannot!" I gasped, and the tears, long pent up and accumulated in my breast, burst forth like a stream which breaks its dikes and goes flowing madly over the country.

"C'est ainsi que vous obeissez a votre seconde mere, c'est ainsi que vous reconnaissez ses bontes!" remarked St. Jerome quietly, "A genoux!"

"Good God! If SHE had seen this!" exclaimed Grandmamma, turning from me and wiping away her tears. "If she had seen this! It may be all for the best, yet she could never have survived such grief--never!" and Grandmamma wept more and more. I too wept, but it never occurred to me to ask for pardon.

"Tranquillisez-vous au nom du ciel, Madame la Comtesse," said St. Jerome, but Grandmamma heard him not. She covered her face with her hands, and her sobs soon passed to hiccups and hysteria. Mimi and Gasha came running in with frightened faces, salts and spirits were applied, and the whole house was soon in a ferment.

"You may feel pleased at your work," said St. Jerome to me as he led me from the room.

"Good God! What have I done?" I thought to myself. "What a terribly bad

boy I am!"

As soon as St. Jerome, bidding me go into his room, had returned to Grandmamma, I, all unconscious of what I was doing, ran down the grand staircase leading to the front door. Whether I intended to drown myself, or whether merely to run away from home, I do not remember. I only know that I went blindly on, my face covered with my hands that I might see nothing.

"Where are you going to?" asked a well-known voice. "I want you, my boy."

I would have passed on, but Papa caught hold of me, and said sternly:

"Come here, you impudent rascal. How could you dare to do such a thing as to touch the portfolio in my study?" he went on as he dragged me into his room. "Oh! you are silent, eh?" and he pulled my ear.

"Yes, I WAS naughty," I said. "I don't know myself what came over me then."

"So you don't know what came over you--you don't know, you don't know?" he repeated as he pulled my ear harder and harder. "Will you go and put your nose where you ought not to again--will you, will you?"

Although my ear was in great pain, I did not cry, but, on the contrary,

felt a sort of morally pleasing sensation. No sooner did he let go of my ear than I seized his hand and covered it with tears and kisses.

"Please whip me!" I cried, sobbing. "Please hurt me the more and more, for I am a wretched, bad, miserable boy!"

"Why, what on earth is the matter with you?" he said, giving me a slight push from him.

"No, I will not go away!" I continued, seizing his coat. "Every one else hates me--I know that, but do YOU listen to me and protect me, or else send me away altogether. I cannot live with HIM. He tries to humiliate me--he tells me to kneel before him, and wants to strike me. I can't stand it. I'm not a baby. I can't stand it--I shall die, I shall kill myself. HE told Grandmamma that I was naughty, and now she is ill--she will die through me. It is all his fault. Please let me--W-why should-he-tor-ment me?"

The tears choked my further speech. I sat down on the sofa, and, with my head buried on Papa's knees, sobbed until I thought I should die of grief.

"Come, come! Why are you such a water-pump?" said Papa compassionately, as he stooped over me.

"He is such a bully! He is murdering me! I shall die! Nobody loves me at

all!" I gasped almost inaudibly, and went into convulsions.

Papa lifted me up, and carried me to my bedroom, where I fell asleep.

When I awoke it was late. Only a solitary candle burned in the room, while beside the bed there were seated Mimi, Lubotshka, and our doctor. In their faces I could discern anxiety for my health, so, although I felt so well after my twelve-hours' sleep that I could have got up directly, I thought it best to let them continue thinking that I was unwell.