

XVIII. THE MAIDSERVANTS' ROOM

I BEGAN to feel more and more lonely, until my chief solace lay in solitary reflection and observation. Of the favourite subject of my reflections I shall speak in the next chapter. The scene where I indulged in them was, for preference, the maidservants' room, where a plot suitable for a novel was in progress--a plot which touched and engrossed me to the highest degree. The heroine of the romance was, of course, Masha. She was in love with Basil, who had known her before she had become a servant in our house, and who had promised to marry her some day. Unfortunately, fate, which had separated them five years ago, and afterwards reunited them in Grandmamma's abode, next proceeded to interpose an obstacle between them in the shape of Masha's uncle, our man Nicola, who would not hear of his niece marrying that "uneducated and unbearable fellow," as he called Basil. One effect of the obstacle had been to make the otherwise slightly cool and indifferent Basil fall as passionately in love with Masha as it is possible for a man to be who is only a servant and a tailor, wears a red shirt, and has his hair pomaded. Although his methods of expressing his affection were odd (for instance, whenever he met Masha he always endeavoured to inflict upon her some bodily pain, either by pinching her, giving her a slap with his open hand, or squeezing her so hard that she could scarcely breathe), that affection was sincere enough, and he proved it by the fact that, from the moment when Nicola refused him his niece's hand, his grief led him to drinking, and to frequenting taverns, until he proved so unruly that more than once he had to be sent to undergo a humiliating

chastisement at the police-station.

Nevertheless, these faults of his and their consequences only served to elevate him in Masha's eyes, and to increase her love for him. Whenever he was in the hands of the police, she would sit crying the whole day, and complain to Gasha of her hard fate (Gasha played an active part in the affairs of these unfortunate lovers). Then, regardless of her uncle's anger and blows, she would stealthily make her way to the police-station, there to visit and console her swain.

Excuse me, reader, for introducing you to such company. Nevertheless, if the cords of love and compassion have not wholly snapped in your soul, you will find, even in that maidservants' room, something which may cause them to vibrate again.

So, whether you please to follow me or not, I will return to the alcove on the staircase whence I was able to observe all that passed in that room. From my post I could see the stove-couch, with, upon it, an iron, an old cap-stand with its peg bent crooked, a wash-tub, and a basin.

There, too, was the window, with, in fine disorder before it, a piece of black wax, some fragments of silk, a half-eaten cucumber, a box of sweets, and so on. There, too, was the large table at which SHE used to sit in the pink cotton dress which I admired so much and the blue handkerchief which always caught my attention so. She would be sewing-though interrupting her work at intervals to scratch her head

a little, to bite the end of her thread, or to snuff the candle--and I would think to myself: "Why was she not born a lady--she with her blue eyes, beautiful fair hair, and magnificent bust? How splendid she would look if she were sitting in a drawing-room and dressed in a cap with pink ribbons and a silk gown--not one like Mimi's, but one like the gown which I saw the other day on the Tverski Boulevard!" Yes, she would work at the embroidery-frame, and I would sit and look at her in the mirror, and be ready to do whatsoever she wanted--to help her on with her mantle or to hand her food. As for Basil's drunken face and horrid figure in the scanty coat with the red shirt showing beneath it, well, in his every gesture, in his every movement of his back, I seemed always to see signs of the humiliating chastisements which he had undergone.

"Ah, Basil! AGAIN?" cried Masha on one occasion as she stuck her needle into the pincushion, but without looking up at the person who was entering.

"What is the good of a man like HIM?" was Basil's first remark.

"Yes. If only he would say something DECISIVE! But I am powerless in the matter--I am all at odds and ends, and through his fault, too."

"Will you have some tea?" put in Madesha (another servant).

"No, thank you.--But why does he hate me so, that old thief of an uncle of yours? Why? Is it because of the clothes I wear, or of my height,

or of my walk, or what? Well, damn and confound him!" finished Basil, snapping his fingers.

"We must be patient," said Masha, threading her needle.

"You are so--"

"It is my nerves that won't stand it, that's all."

At this moment the door of Grandmamma's room banged, and Gasha's angry voice could be heard as she came up the stairs.

"There!" she muttered with a gesture of her hands. "Try to please people when even they themselves do not know what they want, and it is a cursed life--sheer hard labour, and nothing else! If only a certain thing would happen!--though God forgive me for thinking it!"

"Good evening, Agatha Michaelovna," said Basil, rising to greet her.

"You here?" she answered brusquely as she stared at him, "That is not very much to your credit. What do you come here for? Is the maids' room a proper place for men?"

"I wanted to see how you were," said Basil soothingly.

"I shall soon be breathing my last--THAT'S how I am!" cried Gasha, still

greatly incensed.

Basil laughed.

"Oh, there's nothing to laugh at when I say that I shall soon be dead. But that's how it will be, all the same. Just look at the drunkard! Marry her, would he? The fool! Come, get out of here!" and, with a stamp of her foot on the floor, Gasha retreated to her own room, and banged the door behind her until the window rattled again. For a while she could be heard scolding at everything, flinging dresses and other things about, and pulling the ears of her favourite cat. Then the door opened again, and puss, mewling pitifully, was flung forth by the tail.

"I had better come another time for tea," said Basil in a whisper--"at some better time for our meeting."

"No, no!" put in Madesha. "I'll go and fetch the urn at once."

"I mean to put an end to things soon," went on Basil, seating himself beside Masha as soon as ever Madesha had left the room. "I had much better go straight to the Countess, and say 'so-and-so' or I will throw up my situation and go off into the world. Oh dear, oh dear!"

"And am I to remain here?"

"Ah, there's the difficulty--that's what I feel so badly about, You have

been my sweetheart so long, you see. Ah, dear me!"

"Why don't you bring me your shirts to wash, Basil?" asked Masha after a pause, during which she had been inspecting his wrist-bands.

At this moment Grandmamma's bell rang, and Gasha issued from her room again.

"What do you want with her, you impudent fellow?" she cried as she pushed Basil (who had risen at her entrance) before her towards the door. "First you lead a girl on, and then you want to lead her further still. I suppose it amuses you to see her tears. There's the door, now. Off you go! We want your room, not your company. And what good can you see in him?" she went on, turning to Masha. "Has not your uncle been walking into you to-day already? No; she must stick to her promise, forsooth! 'I will have no one but Basil,' Fool that you are!"

"Yes, I WILL have no one but him! I'll never love any one else! I could kill myself for him!" poor Masha burst out, the tears suddenly gushing forth.

For a while I stood watching her as she wiped away those tears. Then I fell to contemplating Basil attentively, in the hope of finding out what there was in him that she found so attractive; yet, though I sympathised with her sincerely in her grief, I could not for the life of me understand how such a charming creature as I considered her to be could

love a man like him.

"When I become a man," I thought to myself as I returned to my room, "Petrovskoe shall be mine, and Basil and Masha my servants. Some day, when I am sitting in my study and smoking a pipe, Masha will chance to pass the door on her way to the kitchen with an iron, and I shall say, 'Masha, come here,' and she will enter, and there will be no one else in the room. Then suddenly Basil too will enter, and, on seeing her, will cry, 'My sweetheart is lost to me!' and Masha will begin to weep, Then I shall say, 'Basil, I know that you love her, and that she loves you. Here are a thousand roubles for you. Marry her, and may God grant you both happiness!' Then I shall leave them together."

Among the countless thoughts and fancies which pass, without logic or sequence, through the mind and the imagination, there are always some which leave behind them a mark so profound that, without remembering their exact subject, we can at least recall that something good has passed through our brain, and try to retain and reproduce its effect. Such was the mark left upon my consciousness by the idea of sacrificing my feelings to Masha's happiness, seeing that she believed that she could attain it only through a union with Basil.