

XXII. PAPA

Papa had been in a particularly good humour ever since Woloda had passed into the University, and came much oftener to dine with Grandmamma. However, I knew from Nicola that he had won a great deal lately. Occasionally, he would come and sit with us in the evening before going to the club. He used to sit down to the piano and bid us group ourselves around him, after which he would beat time with his thin boots (he detested heels, and never wore them), and make us sing gipsy songs. At such times you should have seen the quaint enthusiasm of his beloved Lubotshka, who adored him!

Sometimes, again, he would come to the schoolroom and listen with a grave face as I said my lessons; yet by the few words which he would let drop when correcting me, I could see that he knew even less about the subject than I did. Not infrequently, too, he would wink at us and make secret signs when Grandmamma was beginning to scold us and find fault with us all round. "So much for us children!" he would say. On the whole, however, the impossible pinnacle upon which my childish imagination had placed him had undergone a certain abasement. I still kissed his large white hand with a certain feeling of love and respect, but I also allowed myself to think about him and to criticise his behaviour until involuntarily thoughts occurred to me which alarmed me by their presence. Never shall I forget one incident in particular which awakened thoughts of this kind, and caused me intense astonishment. Late one evening, he entered the drawing-room in his black dress-coat and

white waistcoat, to take Woloda (who was still dressing in his bedroom) to a ball. Grandmamma was also in her bedroom, but had given orders that, before setting out, Woloda was to come and say goodbye to her (it was her invariable custom to inspect him before he went to a ball, and to bless him and direct him as to his behaviour). The room where we were was lighted by a solitary lamp. Mimi and Katenka were walking up and down, and Lubotshka was playing Field's Second Concerto (Mamma's favourite piece) at the piano. Never was there such a family likeness as between Mamma and my sister--not so much in the face or the stature as in the hands, the walk, the voice, the favourite expressions, and, above all, the way of playing the piano and the whole demeanour at the instrument. Lubotshka always arranged her dress when sitting down just as Mamma had done, as well as turned the leaves like her, tapped her fingers angrily and said "Dear me!" whenever a difficult passage did not go smoothly, and, in particular, played with the delicacy and exquisite purity of touch which in those days caused the execution of Field's music to be known characteristically as "jeu perle" and to lie beyond comparison with the humbug of our modern virtuosi.

Papa entered the room with short, soft steps, and approached Lubotshka. On seeing him she stopped playing.

"No, go on, Luba, go on," he said as he forced her to sit down again.

She went on playing, while Papa, his head on his hand, sat near her for a while. Then suddenly he gave his shoulders a shrug, and, rising, began to pace the room. Every time that he approached the piano he halted

for a moment and looked fixedly at Lubotshka. By his walk and his every movement, I could see that he was greatly agitated. Once, when he stopped behind Lubotshka, he kissed her black hair, and then, wheeling quickly round, resumed his pacing. The piece finished, Lubotshka went up to him and said, "Was it well played?" whereupon, without answering, he took her head in his two hands, and kissed her forehead and eyes with such tenderness as I had never before seen him display.

"Why, you are crying!" cried Lubotshka suddenly as she ceased to toy with his watch-chain and stared at him with her great black eyes.

"Pardon me, darling Papa! I had quite forgotten that it was dear Mamma's piece which I was playing."

"No, no, my love; play it often," he said in a voice trembling with emotion. "Ah, if you only knew how much good it does me to share your tears!"

He kissed her again, and then, mastering his feelings and shrugging his shoulders, went to the door leading to the corridor which ran past Woloda's room.

"Waldemar, shall you be ready soon?" he cried, halting in the middle of the passage. Just then Masha came along.

"Why, you look prettier every day," he said to her. She blushed and passed on.

"Waldemar, shall you be ready soon?" he cried again, with a cough and a shake of his shoulders, just as Masha slipped away and he first caught sight of me.

I loved Papa, but the intellect is independent of the heart, and often gives birth to thoughts which offend and are harsh and incomprehensible to the feelings. And it was thoughts of this kind that, for all I strove to put them away, arose at that moment in my mind.