

### XXIII. GRANDMAMMA

Grandmamma was growing weaker every day. Her bell, Gasha's grumbling voice, and the slamming of doors in her room were sounds of constant occurrence, and she no longer received us sitting in the Voltairian arm-chair in her boudoir, but lying on the bed in her bedroom, supported on lace-trimmed cushions. One day when she greeted us, I noticed a yellowish-white swelling on her hand, and smelt the same oppressive odour which I had smelt five years ago in Mamma's room. The doctor came three times a day, and there had been more than one consultation. Yet the character of her haughty, ceremonious bearing towards all who lived with her, and particularly towards Papa, never changed in the least. She went on emphasising certain words, raising her eyebrows, and saying "my dear," just as she had always done.

Then for a few days we did not see her at all, and one morning St. Jerome proposed to me that Woloda and I should take Katenka and Lubotshka for a drive during the hours generally allotted to study. Although I observed that the street was lined with straw under the windows of Grandmamma's room, and that some men in blue stockings [Undertaker's men.] were standing at our gate, the reason never dawned upon me why we were being sent out at that unusual hour. Throughout the drive Lubotshka and I were in that particularly merry mood when the least trifle, the least word or movement, sets one off laughing.

A pedlar went trotting across the road with a tray, and we laughed.

Some ragged cabmen, brandishing their reins and driving at full speed, overtook our sledge, and we laughed again. Next, Philip's whip got caught in the side of the vehicle, and the way in which he said, "Bother the thing!" as he drove to disentangle it almost killed us with mirth. Mimi looked displeased, and said that only silly people laughed for no reason at all, but Lubotshka--her face purple with suppressed merriment--needed but to give me a sly glance, and we again burst out into such Homeric laughter, when our eyes met, that the tears rushed into them and we could not stop our paroxysms, although they nearly choked us. Hardly, again, had we desisted a little when I looked at Lubotshka once more, and gave vent to one of the slang words which we then affected among ourselves--words which always called forth hilarity; and in a moment we were laughing again.

Just as we reached home, I was opening my mouth to make a splendid grimace at Lubotshka when my eye fell upon a black coffin-cover which was leaning against the gate--and my mouth remained fixed in its gaping position.

"Your Grandmamma is dead," said St. Jerome as he met us. His face was very pale.

Throughout the whole time that Grandmamma's body was in the house I was oppressed with the fear of death, for the corpse served as a forcible and disagreeable reminder that I too must die some day--a feeling which people often mistake for grief. I had no sincere regret for Grandmamma,

nor, I think, had any one else, since, although the house was full of sympathising callers, nobody seemed to mourn for her from their hearts except one mourner whose genuine grief made a great impression upon me, seeing that the mourner in question was--Gasha! She shut herself up in the garret, tore her hair and refused all consolation, saying that, now that her mistress was dead, she only wished to die herself.

I again assert that, in matters of feeling, it is the unexpected effects that constitute the most reliable signs of sincerity.

Though Grandmamma was no longer with us, reminiscences and gossip about her long went on in the house. Such gossip referred mostly to her will, which she had made shortly before her death, and of which, as yet, no one knew the contents except her bosom friend, Prince Ivan Ivanovitch. I could hear the servants talking excitedly together, and making innumerable conjectures as to the amount left and the probable beneficiaries: nor can I deny that the idea that we ourselves were probably the latter greatly pleased me.

Six weeks later, Nicola--who acted as regular news-agent to the house--informed me that Grandmamma had left the whole of her fortune to Lubotshka, with, as her trustee until her majority, not Papa, but Prince Ivan Ivanovitch!