

V -- THE IDIOT

The man who now entered the room was about fifty years old, with a pale, attenuated face pitted with smallpox, long grey hair, and a scanty beard of a reddish hue. Likewise he was so tall that, on coming through the doorway, he was forced not only to bend his head, but to incline his whole body forward. He was dressed in a sort of smock that was much torn, and held in his hand a stout staff. As he entered he smote this staff upon the floor, and, contracting his brows and opening his mouth to its fullest extent, laughed in a dreadful, unnatural way. He had lost the sight of one eye, and its colourless pupil kept rolling about and imparting to his hideous face an even more repellent expression than it otherwise bore.

"Hullo, you are caught!" he exclaimed as he ran to Woloda with little short steps and, seizing him round the head, looked at it searchingly. Next he left him, went to the table, and, with a perfectly serious expression on his face, began to blow under the oil-cloth, and to make the sign of the cross over it, "O-oh, what a pity! O-oh, how it hurts! They are angry! They fly from me!" he exclaimed in a tearful choking voice as he glared at Woloda and wiped away the streaming tears with his sleeve, His voice was harsh and rough, all his movements hysterical and spasmodic, and his words devoid of sense or connection (for he used no conjunctions). Yet the tone of that voice was so heartrending, and his yellow, deformed face at times so sincere and pitiful in its expression, that, as one listened to him, it was impossible to repress a mingled

sensation of pity, grief, and fear.

This was the idiot Grisha. Whence he had come, or who were his parents, or what had induced him to choose the strange life which he led, no one ever knew. All that I myself knew was that from his fifteenth year upwards he had been known as an imbecile who went barefooted both in winter and summer, visited convents, gave little images to any one who cared to take them, and spoke meaningless words which some people took for prophecies; that nobody remembered him as being different; that at, rare intervals he used to call at Grandmamma's house; and that by some people he was said to be the outcast son of rich parents and a pure, saintly soul, while others averred that he was a mere peasant and an idler.

At last the punctual and wished-for Foka arrived, and we went downstairs. Grisha followed us sobbing and continuing to talk nonsense, and knocking his staff on each step of the staircase. When we entered the drawing-room we found Papa and Mamma walking up and down there, with their hands clasped in each other's, and talking in low tones. Maria Ivanovna was sitting bolt upright in an arm-chair placed at tight angles to the sofa, and giving some sort of a lesson to the two girls sitting beside her. When Karl Ivanitch entered the room she looked at him for a moment, and then turned her eyes away with an expression which seemed to say, "You are beneath my notice, Karl Ivanitch." It was easy to see from the girls' eyes that they had important news to communicate to us as soon as an opportunity occurred (for to leave their seats and approach

us first was contrary to Mimi's rules). It was for us to go to her and say, "Bon jour, Mimi," and then make her a low bow; after which we should possibly be permitted to enter into conversation with the girls.

What an intolerable creature that Mimi was! One could hardly say a word in her presence without being found fault with. Also whenever we wanted to speak in Russian, she would say, "Parlez, donc, francais," as though on purpose to annoy us, while, if there was any particularly nice dish at luncheon which we wished to enjoy in peace, she would keep on ejaculating, "Mangez, donc, avec du pain!" or, "Comment est-ce que vous tenez votre fourchette?" "What has SHE got to do with us?" I used to think to myself. "Let her teach the girls. WE have our Karl Ivanitch." I shared to the full his dislike of "certain people."

"Ask Mamma to let us go hunting too," Katenka whispered to me, as she caught me by the sleeve just when the elders of the family were making a move towards the dining-room.

"Very well. I will try."

Grisha likewise took a seat in the dining-room, but at a little table apart from the rest. He never lifted his eyes from his plate, but kept on sighing and making horrible grimaces, as he muttered to himself: "What a pity! It has flown away! The dove is flying to heaven! The stone lies on the tomb!" and so forth.

Ever since the morning Mamma had been absent-minded, and Grisha's presence, words, and actions seemed to make her more so.

"By the way, there is something I forgot to ask you," she said, as she handed Papa a plate of soup.

"What is it?"

"That you will have those dreadful dogs of yours tied up, They nearly worried poor Grisha to death when he entered the courtyard, and I am sure they will bite the children some day."

No sooner did Grisha hear himself mentioned that he turned towards our table and showed us his torn clothes. Then, as he went on with his meal, he said: "He would have let them tear me in pieces, but God would not allow it! What a sin to let the dogs loose--a great sin! But do not beat him, master; do not beat him! It is for God to forgive! It is past now!"

"What does he say?" said Papa, looking at him gravely and sternly. "I cannot understand him at all."

"I think he is saying," replied Mamma, "that one of the huntsmen set the dogs on him, but that God would not allow him to be torn in pieces, Therefore he begs you not to punish the man."

"Oh, is that it?" said Papa, "How does he know that I intended to

punish the huntsman? You know, I am not very fond of fellows like this," he added in French, "and this one offends me particularly. Should it ever happen that--"

"Oh, don't say so," interrupted Mamma, as if frightened by some thought.

"How can you know what he is?"

"I think I have plenty of opportunities for doing so, since no lack of them come to see you--all of them the same sort, and probably all with the same story."

I could see that Mamma's opinion differed from his, but that she did not mean to quarrel about it.

"Please hand me the cakes," she said to him, "Are they good to-day or not?"

"Yes, I AM angry," he went on as he took the cakes and put them where Mamma could not reach them, "very angry at seeing supposedly reasonable and educated people let themselves be deceived," and he struck the table with his fork.

"I asked you to hand me the cakes," she repeated with outstretched hand.

"And it is a good thing," Papa continued as he put the hand aside, "that the police run such vagabonds in. All they are good for is to play upon

the nerves of certain people who are already not over-strong in that respect," and he smiled, observing that Mamma did not like the conversation at all. However, he handed her the cakes.

"All that I have to say," she replied, "is that one can hardly believe that a man who, though sixty years of age, goes barefooted winter and summer, and always wears chains of two pounds' weight, and never accepts the offers made to him to live a quiet, comfortable life--it is difficult to believe that such a man should act thus out of laziness." Pausing a moment, she added with a sigh: "As to predictions, je suis payee pour y croire, I told you, I think, that Grisha prophesied the very day and hour of poor Papa's death?"

"Oh, what HAVE you gone and done?" said Papa, laughing and putting his hand to his cheek (whenever he did this I used to look for something particularly comical from him). "Why did you call my attention to his feet? I looked at them, and now can eat nothing more."

Luncheon was over now, and Lubotshka and Katenka were winking at us, fidgeting about in their chairs, and showing great restlessness. The winking, of course, signified, "Why don't you ask whether we too may go to the hunt?" I nudged Woloda, and Woloda nudged me back, until at last I took heart of grace, and began (at first shyly, but gradually with more assurance) to ask if it would matter much if the girls too were allowed to enjoy the sport. Thereupon a consultation was held among the elder folks, and eventually leave was granted--Mamma, to make things

still more delightful, saying that she would come too.