

XIII -- NATALIA SAVISHNA

In days gone by there used to run about the seignorial courtyard of the country-house at Chabarovska a girl called Natashka. She always wore a cotton dress, went barefooted, and was rosy, plump, and gay. It was at the request and entreaties of her father, the clarionet player Savi, that my grandfather had "taken her upstairs"--that is to say, made her one of his wife's female servants. As chamber-maid, Natashka so distinguished herself by her zeal and amiable temper that when Mamma arrived as a baby and required a nurse Natashka was honoured with the charge of her. In this new office the girl earned still further praises and rewards for her activity, trustworthiness, and devotion to her young mistress. Soon, however, the powdered head and buckled shoes of the young and active footman Foka (who had frequent opportunities of courting her, since they were in the same service) captivated her unsophisticated, but loving, heart. At last she ventured to go and ask my grandfather if she might marry Foka, but her master took the request in bad part, flew into a passion, and punished poor Natashka by exiling her to a farm which he owned in a remote quarter of the Steppes. At length, when she had been gone six months and nobody could be found to replace her, she was recalled to her former duties. Returned, and with her dress in rags, she fell at Grandpapa's feet, and besought him to restore her his favour and kindness, and to forget the folly of which she had been guilty--folly which, she assured him, should never recur again. And she kept her word.

From that time forth she called herself, not Natashka, but Natalia Savishna, and took to wearing a cap, All the love in her heart was now bestowed upon her young charge. When Mamma had a governess appointed for her education, Natalia was awarded the keys as housekeeper, and henceforth had the linen and provisions under her care. These new duties she fulfilled with equal fidelity and zeal. She lived only for her master's advantage. Everything in which she could detect fraud, extravagance, or waste she endeavoured to remedy to the best of her power. When Mamma married and wished in some way to reward Natalia Savishna for her twenty years of care and labour, she sent for her and, voicing in the tenderest terms her attachment and love, presented her with a stamped charter of her (Natalia's) freedom, [It will be remembered that this was in the days of serfdom] telling her at the same time that, whether she continued to serve in the household or not, she should always receive an annual pension Of 300 roubles. Natalia listened in silence to this. Then, taking the document in her hands and regarding it with a frown, she muttered something between her teeth, and darted from the room, slamming the door behind her. Not understanding the reason for such strange conduct, Mamma followed her presently to her room, and found her sitting with streaming eyes on her trunk, crushing her pocket-handkerchief between her fingers, and looking mournfully at the remains of the document, which was lying torn to pieces on the floor.

"What is the matter, dear Natalia Savishna?" said Mamma, taking her hand.

"Nothing, ma'am," she replied; "only--only I must have displeased you somehow, since you wish to dismiss me from the house. Well, I will go."

She withdrew her hand and, with difficulty restraining her tears, rose to leave the room, but Mamma stopped her, and they wept a while in one another's arms.

Ever since I can remember anything I can remember Natalia Savishna and her love and tenderness; yet only now have I learnt to appreciate them at their full value. In early days it never occurred to me to think what a rare and wonderful being this old domestic was. Not only did she never talk, but she seemed never even to think, of herself. Her whole life was compounded of love and self-sacrifice. Yet so used was I to her affection and singleness of heart that I could not picture things otherwise. I never thought of thanking her, or of asking myself, "Is she also happy? Is she also contented?" Often on some pretext or another I would leave my lessons and run to her room, where, sitting down, I would begin to muse aloud as though she were not there. She was forever mending something, or tidying the shelves which lined her room, or marking linen, so that she took no heed of the nonsense which I talked--how that I meant to become a general, to marry a beautiful woman, to buy a chestnut horse, to, build myself a house of glass, to invite Karl Ivanitch's relatives to come and visit me from Saxony, and so forth; to all of which she would only reply, "Yes, my love, yes." Then, on my rising, and preparing to go, she would open a blue trunk

which had pasted on the inside of its lid a coloured picture of a hussar which had once adorned a pomade bottle and a sketch made by Woloda, and take from it a fumigation pastille, which she would light and shake for my benefit, saying:

"These, dear, are the pastilles which your grandfather (now in Heaven) brought back from Otchakov after fighting against the Turks." Then she would add with a sigh: "But this is nearly the last one."

The trunks which filled her room seemed to contain almost everything in the world. Whenever anything was wanted, people said, "Oh, go and ask Natalia Savishna for it," and, sure enough, it was seldom that she did not produce the object required and say, "See what comes of taking care of everything!" Her trunks contained thousands of things which nobody in the house but herself would have thought of preserving.

Once I lost my temper with her. This was how it happened.

One day after luncheon I poured myself out a glass of kvass, and then dropped the decanter, and so stained the tablecloth.

"Go and call Natalia, that she may come and see what her darling has done," said Mamma.

Natalia arrived, and shook her head at me when she saw the damage I had done; but Mamma whispered something in her ear, threw a look at myself,

and then left the room.

I was just skipping away, in the sprightliest mood possible, when Natalia darted out upon me from behind the door with the tablecloth in her hand, and, catching hold of me, rubbed my face hard with the stained part of it, repeating, "Don't thou go and spoil tablecloths any more!"

I struggled hard, and roared with temper.

"What?" I said to myself as I fled to the drawing-room in a mist of tears, "To think that Natalia Savishna-just plain Natalia-should say 'THOU' to me and rub my face with a wet tablecloth as though I were a mere servant-boy! It is abominable!"

Seeing my fury, Natalia departed, while I continued to strut about and plan how to punish the bold woman for her offence. Yet not more than a few moments had passed when Natalia returned and, stealing to my side, began to comfort me,

"Hush, then, my love. Do not cry. Forgive me my rudeness. It was wrong of me. You WILL pardon me, my darling, will you not? There, there, that's a dear," and she took from her handkerchief a cornet of pink paper containing two little cakes and a grape, and offered it me with a trembling hand. I could not look the kind old woman in the face, but, turning aside, took the paper, while my tears flowed the faster--though from love and shame now, not from anger.