

## XVI -- VERSE-MAKING

RATHER less than a month after our arrival in Moscow I was sitting upstairs in my Grandmamma's house and doing some writing at a large table. Opposite to me sat the drawing master, who was giving a few finishing touches to the head of a turbaned Turk, executed in black pencil. Woloda, with out-stretched neck, was standing behind the drawing master and looking over his shoulder. The head was Woloda's first production in pencil and to-day--Grandmamma's name-day--the masterpiece was to be presented to her.

"Aren't you going to put a little more shadow there?" said Woloda to the master as he raised himself on tiptoe and pointed to the Turk's neck.

"No, it is not necessary," the master replied as he put pencil and drawing-pen into a japanned folding box. "It is just right now, and you need not do anything more to it. As for you, Nicolinka," he added, rising and glancing askew at the Turk, "won't you tell us your great secret at last? What are you going to give your Grandmamma? I think another head would be your best gift. But good-bye, gentlemen," and taking his hat and cardboard he departed.

I too had thought that another head than the one at which I had been working would be a better gift; so, when we were told that Grandmamma's name-day was soon to come round and that we must each of us have a

present ready for her, I had taken it into my head to write some verses in honour of the occasion, and had forthwith composed two rhymed couplets, hoping that the rest would soon materialise. I really do not know how the idea--one so peculiar for a child--came to occur to me, but I know that I liked it vastly, and answered all questions on the subject of my gift by declaring that I should soon have something ready for Grandmamma, but was not going to say what it was.

Contrary to my expectation, I found that, after the first two couplets executed in the initial heat of enthusiasm, even my most strenuous efforts refused to produce another one. I began to read different poems in our books, but neither Dimitrieff nor Derzhavin could help me. On the contrary, they only confirmed my sense of incompetence. Knowing, however, that Karl Ivanitch was fond of writing verses, I stole softly upstairs to burrow among his papers, and found, among a number of German verses, some in the Russian language which seemed to have come from his own pen.

To L

Remember near

Remember far,

Remember me.

To-day be faithful, and for ever--

Aye, still beyond the grave--remember

That I have well loved thee.

"KARL MAYER."

These verses (which were written in a fine, round hand on thin letter-paper) pleased me with the touching sentiment with which they seemed to be inspired. I learnt them by heart, and decided to take them as a model. The thing was much easier now. By the time the name-day had arrived I had completed a twelve-couplet congratulatory ode, and sat down to the table in our school-room to copy them out on vellum.

Two sheets were soon spoiled--not because I found it necessary to alter anything (the verses seemed to me perfect), but because, after the third line, the tail-end of each successive one would go curving upward and making it plain to all the world that the whole thing had been written with a want of adherence to the horizontal--a thing which I could not bear to see.

The third sheet also came out crooked, but I determined to make it do. In my verses I congratulated Grandmamma, wished her many happy returns, and concluded thus:

"Endeavouring you to please and cheer,  
We love you like our Mother dear."

This seemed to me not bad, yet it offended my ear somehow.

"Lo-ve you li-ike our Mo-ther dear," I repeated to myself. "What other rhyme could I use instead of 'dear'? Fear? Steer? Well, it must go at that. At least the verses are better than Karl Ivanitch's."

Accordingly I added the last verse to the rest. Then I went into our bedroom and recited the whole poem aloud with much feeling and gesticulation. The verses were altogether guiltless of metre, but I did not stop to consider that. Yet the last one displeased me more than ever. As I sat on my bed I thought:

"Why on earth did I write 'like our Mother dear'? She is not here, and therefore she need never have been mentioned. True, I love and respect Grandmamma, but she is not quite the same as--Why DID I write that? What did I go and tell a lie for? They may be verses only, yet I needn't quite have done that."

At that moment the tailor arrived with some new clothes for us.

"Well, so be it!" I said in much vexation as I crammed the verses hastily under my pillow and ran down to adorn myself in the new Moscow garments.

They fitted marvellously--both the brown jacket with yellow buttons (a garment made skin-tight and not "to allow room for growth," as in the country) and the black trousers (also close-fitting so that they displayed the figure and lay smoothly over the boots).

"At last I have real trousers on!" I thought as I looked at my legs with the utmost satisfaction. I concealed from every one the fact that the new clothes were horribly tight and uncomfortable, but, on the contrary, said that, if there were a fault, it was that they were not tight enough. For a long while I stood before the looking-glass as I combed my elaborately pomaded head, but, try as I would, I could not reduce the topmost hairs on the crown to order. As soon as ever I left off combing them, they sprang up again and radiated in different directions, thus giving my face a ridiculous expression.

Karl Ivanitch was dressing in another room, and I heard some one bring him his blue frockcoat and under-linen. Then at the door leading downstairs I heard a maid-servant's voice, and went to see what she wanted. In her hand she held a well-starched shirt which she said she had been sitting up all night to get ready. I took it, and asked if Grandmamma was up yet.

"Oh yes, she has had her coffee, and the priest has come. My word, but you look a fine little fellow!" added the girl with a smile at my new clothes.

This observation made me blush, so I whirled round on one leg, snapped my fingers, and went skipping away, in the hope that by these manoeuvres I should make her sensible that even yet she had not realised quite what a fine fellow I was.

However, when I took the shirt to Karl I found that he did not need it, having taken another one. Standing before a small looking-glass, he tied his cravat with both hands--trying, by various motions of his head, to see whether it fitted him comfortably or not--and then took us down to see Grandmamma. To this day I cannot help laughing when I remember what a smell of pomade the three of us left behind us on the staircase as we descended.

Karl was carrying a box which he had made himself, Woloda, his drawing, and I my verses, while each of us also had a form of words ready with which to present his gift. Just as Karl opened the door, the priest put on his vestment and began to say prayers.

During the ceremony Grandmamma stood leaning over the back of a chair, with her head bent down. Near her stood Papa. He turned and smiled at us as we hurriedly thrust our presents behind our backs and tried to remain unobserved by the door. The whole effect of a surprise, upon which we had been counting, was entirely lost. When at last every one had made the sign of the cross I became intolerably oppressed with a sudden, invincible, and deadly attack of shyness, so that the courage to offer my present completely failed me. I hid myself behind Karl Ivanitch, who solemnly congratulated Grandmamma and, transferring his box from his right hand to his left, presented it to her. Then he withdrew a few steps to make way for Woloda. Grandmamma seemed highly pleased with the box (which was adorned with a gold border), and smiled in the most

friendly manner in order to express her gratitude. Yet it was evident that, she did not know where to set the box down, and this probably accounts for the fact that she handed it to Papa, at the same time bidding him observe how beautifully it was made.

His curiosity satisfied, Papa handed the box to the priest, who also seemed particularly delighted with it, and looked with astonishment, first at the article itself, and then at the artist who could make such wonderful things. Then Woloda presented his Turk, and received a similarly flattering ovation on all sides.

It was my turn now, and Grandmamma turned to me with her kindest smile. Those who have experienced what embarrassment is know that it is a feeling which grows in direct proportion to delay, while decision decreases in similar measure. In other words the longer the condition lasts, the more invincible does it become, and the smaller does the power of decision come to be.

My last remnants of nerve and energy had forsaken me while Karl and Woloda had been offering their presents, and my shyness now reached its culminating point, I felt the blood rushing from my heart to my head, one blush succeeding another across my face, and drops of perspiration beginning to stand out on my brow and nose. My ears were burning, I trembled from head to foot, and, though I kept changing from one foot to the other, I remained rooted where I stood.

"Well, Nicolinka, tell us what you have brought?" said Papa. "Is it a box or a drawing?"

There was nothing else to be done. With a trembling hand held out the folded, fatal paper, but my voice failed me completely and I stood before Grandmamma in silence. I could not get rid of the dreadful idea that, instead of a display of the expected drawing, some bad verses of mine were about to be read aloud before every one, and that the words "our Mother dear" would clearly prove that I had never loved, but had only forgotten, her. How shall I express my sufferings when Grandmamma began to read my poetry aloud?--when, unable to decipher it, she stopped half-way and looked at Papa with a smile (which I took to be one of ridicule)?--when she did not pronounce it as I had meant it to be pronounced?--and when her weak sight not allowing her to finish it, she handed the paper to Papa and requested him to read it all over again from the beginning? I fancied that she must have done this last because she did not like to read such a lot of stupid, crookedly written stuff herself, yet wanted to point out to Papa my utter lack of feeling. I expected him to slap me in the face with the verses and say, "You bad boy! So you have forgotten your Mamma! Take that for it!" Yet nothing of the sort happened. On the contrary, when the whole had been read, Grandmamma said, "Charming!" and kissed me on the forehead. Then our presents, together with two cambric pocket-handkerchiefs and a snuff-box engraved with Mamma's portrait, were laid on the table attached to the great Voltairian arm-chair in which Grandmamma always sat.



"The Princess Barbara Ilinitsha!" announced one of the two footmen who used to stand behind Grandmamma's carriage, but Grandmamma was looking thoughtfully at the portrait on the snuff-box, and returned no answer.

"Shall I show her in, madam?" repeated the footman.