

XX -- PREPARATIONS FOR THE PARTY

To judge from the extraordinary activity in the pantry, the shining cleanliness which imparted such a new and festal guise to certain articles in the salon and drawing-room which I had long known as anything but resplendent, and the arrival of some musicians whom Prince Ivan would certainly not have sent for nothing, no small amount of company was to be expected that evening.

At the sound of every vehicle which chanced to pass the house I ran to the window, leaned my head upon my arms, and peered with impatient curiosity into the street.

At last a carriage stopped at our door, and, in the full belief that this must be the Iwins, who had promised to come early, I at once ran downstairs to meet them in the hall.

But, instead of the Iwins, I beheld from behind the figure of the footman who opened the door two female figures—one tall and wrapped in a blue cloak trimmed with marten, and the other one short and wrapped in a green shawl from beneath which a pair of little feet, stuck into fur boots, peeped forth.

Without paying any attention to my presence in the hall (although I thought it my duty, on the appearance of these persons to salute them), the shorter one moved towards the taller, and stood silently in front of

her. Thereupon the tall lady untied the shawl which enveloped the head of the little one, and unbuttoned the cloak which hid her form; until, by the time that the footmen had taken charge of these articles and removed the fur boots, there stood forth from the amorphous chrysalis a charming girl of twelve, dressed in a short muslin frock, white pantaloons, and smart black satin shoes. Around her, white neck she wore a narrow black velvet ribbon, while her head was covered with flaxen curls which so perfectly suited her beautiful face in front and her bare neck and shoulders behind that I, would have believed nobody, not even Karl Ivanitch, if he, or she had told me that they only hung so nicely because, ever since the morning, they had been screwed up in fragments of a Moscow newspaper and then warmed with a hot iron. To me it seemed as though she must have been born with those curls.

The most prominent feature in her face was a pair of unusually large half-veiled eyes, which formed a strange, but pleasing, contrast to the small mouth. Her lips were closed, while her eyes looked so grave that the general expression of her face gave one the impression that a smile was never to be looked for from her: wherefore, when a smile did come, it was all the more pleasing.

Trying to escape notice, I slipped through the door of the salon, and then thought it necessary to be seen pacing to and fro, seemingly engaged in thought, as though unconscious of the arrival of guests.

BY the time, however, that the ladies had advanced to the middle of

the salon I seemed suddenly to awake from my reverie and told them that Grandmamma was in the drawing room, Madame Valakhin, whose face pleased me extremely (especially since it bore a great resemblance to her daughter's), stroked my head kindly.

Grandmamma seemed delighted to see Sonetchka, She invited her to come to her, put back a curl which had fallen over her brow, and looking earnestly at her said, "What a charming child!"

Sonetchka blushed, smiled, and, indeed, looked so charming that I myself blushed as I looked at her.

"I hope you are going to enjoy yourself here, my love," said Grandmamma. "Pray be as merry and dance as much as ever you can. See, we have two beaux for her already," she added, turning to Madame Valakhin, and stretching out her hand to me.

This coupling of Sonetchka and myself pleased me so much that I blushed again.

Feeling, presently, that, my embarrassment was increasing, and hearing the sound of carriages approaching, I thought it wise to retire. In the hall I encountered the Princess Kornakoff, her son, and an incredible number of daughters. They had all of them the same face as their mother, and were very ugly. None of them arrested my attention. They talked in shrill tones as they took off their cloaks and boas, and laughed as they

bustled about--probably at the fact that there were so many of them!

Etienne was a boy of fifteen, tall and plump, with a sharp face, deep-set bluish eyes, and very large hands and feet for his age. Likewise he was awkward, and had a nervous, unpleasing voice. Nevertheless he seemed very pleased with himself, and was, in my opinion, a boy who could well bear being beaten with rods.

For a long time we confronted one another without speaking as we took stock of each other. When the flood of dresses had swept past I made shift to begin a conversation by asking him whether it had not been very close in the carriage.

"I don't know," he answered indifferently. "I never ride inside it, for it makes me feel sick directly, and Mamma knows that. Whenever we are driving anywhere at night-time I always sit on the box. I like that, for then one sees everything. Philip gives me the reins, and sometimes the whip too, and then the people inside get a regular--well, you know," he added with a significant gesture "It's splendid then."

"Master Etienne," said a footman, entering the hall, "Philip wishes me to ask you where you put the whip."

"Where I put it? Why, I gave it back to him."

"But he says that you did not."

"Well, I laid it across the carriage-lamps!"

"No, sir, he says that you did not do that either. You had better confess that you took it and lashed it to shreds. I suppose poor Philip will have to make good your mischief out of his own pocket." The footman (who looked a grave and honest man) seemed much put out by the affair, and determined to sift it to the bottom on Philip's behalf.

Out of delicacy I pretended to notice nothing and turned aside, but the other footmen present gathered round and looked approvingly at the old servant.

"Hm--well, I DID tear it in pieces," at length confessed Etienne, shrinking from further explanations. "However, I will pay for it. Did you ever hear anything so absurd?" he added to me as he drew me towards the drawing-room.

"But excuse me, sir; HOW are you going to pay for it? I know your ways of paying. You have owed Maria Valericana twenty copecks these eight months now, and you have owed me something for two years, and Peter for--"

"Hold your tongue, will you!" shouted the young fellow, pale with rage, "I shall report you for this."

"Oh, you may do so," said the footman. "Yet it is not fair, your highness," he added, with a peculiar stress on the title, as he departed with the ladies' wraps to the cloak-room. We ourselves entered the salon.

"Quite right, footman," remarked someone approvingly from the ball behind us.

Grandmamma had a peculiar way of employing, now the second person singular, now the second person plural, in order to indicate her opinion of people. When the young Prince Etienne went up to her she addressed him as "YOU," and altogether looked at him with such an expression of contempt that, had I been in his place, I should have been utterly crestfallen. Etienne, however, was evidently not a boy of that sort, for he not only took no notice of her reception of him, but none of her person either. In fact, he bowed to the company at large in a way which, though not graceful, was at least free from embarrassment.

Sonetchka now claimed my whole attention. I remember that, as I stood in the salon with Etienne and Woloda, at a spot whence we could both see and be seen by Sonetchka, I took great pleasure in talking very loud (and all my utterances seemed to me both bold and comical) and glancing towards the door of the drawing-room, but that, as soon as ever we happened to move to another spot whence we could neither see nor be seen by her, I became dumb, and thought the conversation had ceased to be enjoyable. The rooms were now full of people--among them (as at all

children's parties) a number of elder children who wished to dance and enjoy themselves very much, but who pretended to do everything merely in order to give pleasure to the mistress of the house.

When the Iwins arrived I found that, instead of being as delighted as usual to meet Seriosha, I felt a kind of vexation that he should see and be seen by Sonetchka.