

XXI -- BEFORE THE MAZURKA

"HULLO, Woloda! So we are going to dance to-night," said Seriosha, issuing from the drawing-room and taking out of his pocket a brand new pair of gloves. "I suppose it IS necessary to put on gloves?"

"Goodness! What shall I do? We have no gloves," I thought to myself.

"I must go upstairs and search about." Yet though I rummaged in every drawer, I only found, in one of them, my green travelling mittens, and, in another, a single lilac-coloured glove, a thing which could be of no use to me, firstly, because it was very old and dirty, secondly, because it was much too large for me, and thirdly (and principally), because the middle finger was wanting--Karl having long ago cut it off to wear over a sore nail.

However, I put it on--not without some diffident contemplation of the blank left by the middle finger and of the ink-stained edges round the vacant space.

"If only Natalia Savishna had been here," I reflected, "we should certainly have found some gloves. I can't go downstairs in this condition. Yet, if they ask me why I am not dancing, what am I to say? However, I can't remain here either, or they will be sending upstairs to fetch me. What on earth am I to do?" and I wrung my hands.

"What are you up to here?" asked Woloda as he burst into the room. "Go

and engage a partner. The dancing will be beginning directly."

"Woloda," I said despairingly, as I showed him my hand with two fingers thrust into a single finger of the dirty glove, "Woloda, you, never thought of this."

"Of what?" he said impatiently. "Oh, of gloves," he added with a careless glance at my hand. "That's nothing. We can ask Grandmamma what she thinks about it," and without further ado he departed downstairs. I felt a trifle relieved by the coolness with which he had met a situation which seemed to me so grave, and hastened back to the drawing-room, completely forgetful of the unfortunate glove which still adorned my left hand.

Cautiously approaching Grandmamma's arm-chair, I asked her in a whisper:

"Grandmamma, what are we to do? We have no gloves."

"What, my love?"

"We have no gloves," I repeated, at the same time bending over towards her and laying both hands on the arm of her chair.

"But what is that?" she cried as she caught hold of my left hand.

"Look, my dear!" she continued, turning to Madame Valakhin. "See how smart this young man has made himself to dance with your daughter!"

As Grandmamma persisted in retaining hold of my hand and gazing with a mock air of gravity and interrogation at all around her, curiosity was soon aroused, and a general roar of laughter ensued.

I should have been infuriated at the thought that Seriosha was present to see this, as I scowled with embarrassment and struggled hard to free my hand, had it not been that somehow Sonetchka's laughter (and she was laughing to such a degree that the tears were standing in her eyes and the curls dancing about her lovely face) took away my feeling of humiliation. I felt that her laughter was not satirical, but only natural and free; so that, as we laughed together and looked at one another, there seemed to begin a kind of sympathy between us. Instead of turning out badly, therefore, the episode of the glove served only to set me at my ease among the dreaded circle of guests, and to make me cease to feel oppressed with shyness. The sufferings of shy people proceed only from the doubts which they feel concerning the opinions of their fellows. No sooner are those opinions expressed (whether flattering or the reverse) than the agony disappears.

How lovely Sonetchka looked when she was dancing a quadrille as my vis-a-vis, with, as her partner, the loutish Prince Etienne! How charmingly she smiled when, en chaine, she accorded me her hand! How gracefully the curls, around her head nodded to the rhythm, and how naively she executed the jete assemble with her little feet!

In the fifth figure, when my partner had to leave me for the other side and I, counting the beats, was getting ready to dance my solo, she pursed her lips gravely and looked in another direction; but her fears for me were groundless. Boldly I performed the *chasse en avant* and *chasse en arriere glissade*, until, when it came to my turn to move towards her and I, with a comic gesture, showed her the poor glove with its crumpled fingers, she laughed heartily, and seemed to move her tiny feet more enchantingly than ever over the parquetted floor.

How well I remember how we formed the circle, and how, without withdrawing her hand from mine, she scratched her little nose with her glove! All this I can see before me still. Still can I hear the quadrille from "The Maids of the Danube" to which we danced that night.

The second quadrille, I danced with Sonetchka herself; yet when we went to sit down together during the interval, I felt overcome with shyness and as though I had nothing to say. At last, when my silence had lasted so long that I began to be afraid that she would think me a stupid boy, I decided at all hazards to counteract such a notion.

"Vous etes une habitante de Moscou?" I began, and, on receiving an affirmative answer, continued. "Et moi, je n'ai encore jamais frequente la capitale" (with a particular emphasis on the word "frequente"). Yet I felt that, brilliant though this introduction might be as evidence of my profound knowledge of the French language, I could not long keep up the conversation in that manner. Our turn for dancing had not yet arrived,

and silence again ensued between us. I kept looking anxiously at her in the hope both of discerning what impression I had produced and of her coming to my aid.

"Where did you get that ridiculous glove of yours?" she asked me all of a sudden, and the question afforded me immense satisfaction and relief. I replied that the glove belonged to Karl Ivanitch, and then went on to speak ironically of his appearance, and to describe how comical he looked in his red cap, and how he and his green coat had once fallen plump off a horse into a pond.

The quadrille was soon over. Yet why had I spoken ironically of poor Karl Ivanitch? Should I, forsooth, have sunk in Sonetchka's esteem if, on the contrary, I had spoken of him with the love and respect which I undoubtedly bore him?

The quadrille ended, Sonetchka said, "Thank you," with as lovely an expression on her face as though I had really conferred, upon her a favour. I was delighted. In fact I hardly knew myself for joy and could not think whence I derived such ease and confidence and even daring.

"Nothing in the world can abash me now," I thought as I wandered carelessly about the salon. "I am ready for anything."

Just then Seriosha came and requested me to be his vis-a-vis.

"Very well," I said. "I have no partner as yet, but I can soon find one."

Glancing round the salon with a confident eye, I saw that every lady was engaged save one--a tall girl standing near the drawing-room door. Yet a grown-up young man was approaching her--probably for the same purpose as myself! He was but two steps from her, while I was at the further end of the salon. Doing a glissade over the polished floor, I covered the intervening space, and in a brave, firm voice asked the favour of her hand in the quadrille. Smiling with a protecting air, the young lady accorded me her hand, and the tall young man was left without a partner. I felt so conscious of my strength that I paid no attention to his irritation, though I learnt later that he had asked somebody who the awkward, untidy boy was who, had taken away his lady from him.