

XXIII -- AFTER THE MAZURKA

At supper the young man whom I have mentioned seated himself beside me at the children's table, and treated me with an amount of attention which would have flattered my self-esteem had I been able, after the occurrence just related, to give a thought to anything beyond my failure in the mazurka. However, the young man seemed determined to cheer me up. He jested, called me "old boy," and finally (since none of the elder folks were looking at us) began to help me to wine, first from one bottle and then from another and to force me to drink it off quickly.

By the time (towards the end of supper) that a servant had poured me out a quarter of a glass of champagne, and the young man had straightway bid him fill it up and urged me to drink the beverage off at a draught, I had begun to feel a grateful warmth diffusing itself through my body. I also felt well-disposed towards my kind patron, and began to laugh heartily at everything. Suddenly the music of the Grosvater dance struck up, and every one rushed from the table. My friendship with the young man had now outlived its day; so, whereas he joined a group of the older folks, I approached Madame Valakhin to hear what she and her daughter had to say to one another.

"Just HALF-an-hour more?" Sonetchka was imploring her.

"Impossible, my dearest."

"Yet, only to please me--just this ONCE?" Sonetchka went on persuasively.

"Well, what if I should be ill to-morrow through all this dissipation?" rejoined her mother, and was incautious enough to smile.

"There! You DO consent, and we CAN stay after all!" exclaimed Sonetchka, jumping for joy.

"What is to be done with such a girl?" said Madame. "Well, run away and dance. See," she added on perceiving myself, "here is a cavalier ready waiting for you."

Sonetchka gave me her hand, and we darted off to the salon, The wine, added to Sonetchka's presence and gaiety, had at once made me forget all about the unfortunate end of the mazurka. I kept executing the most splendid feats with my legs--now imitating a horse as he throws out his hoofs in the trot, now stamping like a sheep infuriated at a dog, and all the while laughing regardless of appearances.

Sonetchka also laughed unceasingly, whether we were whirling round in a circle or whether we stood still to watch an old lady whose painful movements with her feet showed the difficulty she had in walking. Finally Sonetchka nearly died of merriment when I jumped half-way to the ceiling in proof of my skill.

As I passed a mirror in Grandmamma's boudoir and glanced at myself I could see that my face was all in a perspiration and my hair dishevelled--the top-knot, in particular, being more erect than ever. Yet my general appearance looked so happy, healthy, and good-tempered that I felt wholly pleased with myself.

"If I were always as I am now," I thought, "I might yet be able to please people with my looks." Yet as soon as I glanced at my partner's face again, and saw there not only the expression of happiness, health, and good temper which had just pleased me in my own, but also a fresh and enchanting beauty besides, I felt dissatisfied with myself again. I understood how silly of me it was to hope to attract the attention of such a wonderful being as Sonetchka. I could not hope for reciprocity--could not even think of it, yet my heart was overflowing with happiness. I could not imagine that the feeling of love which was filling my soul so pleasantly could require any happiness still greater, or wish for more than that that happiness should never cease. I felt perfectly contented. My heart beat like that of a dove, with the blood constantly flowing back to it, and I almost wept for joy.

As we passed through the hall and peered into a little dark store-room beneath the staircase I thought: "What bliss it would be if I could pass the rest of my life with her in that dark corner, and never let anybody know that we were there!"

"It HAS been a delightful evening, hasn't it?" I asked her in a low,

tremulous voice. Then I quickened my steps--as much out of fear of what I had said as out of fear of what I had meant to imply.

"Yes, VERY!" she answered, and turned her face to look at me with an expression so kind that I ceased to be afraid. I went on:

"Particularly since supper. Yet if you could only know how I regret" (I had nearly said) "how miserable I am at your going, and to think that we shall see each other no more!"

"But why SHOULDN'T we?" she asked, looking gravely at the corner of her pocket-handkerchief, and gliding her fingers over a latticed screen which we were passing. "Every Tuesday and Friday I go with Mamma to the Iverskoi Prospect. I suppose you go for walks too sometimes?"

"Well, certainly I shall ask to go for one next Tuesday, and, if they won't take me I shall go by myself--even without my hat, if necessary. I know the way all right."

"Do you know what I have just thought of?" she went on. "You know, I call some of the boys who come to see us THOU. Shall you and I call each other THOU too? Wilt THOU?" she added, bending her head towards me and looking me straight in the eyes.

At this moment a more lively section of the Grosvater dance began.

"Give me your hand," I said, under the impression that the music and din would drown my exact words, but she smilingly replied, "THY hand, not YOUR hand." Yet the dance was over before I had succeeded in saying THOU, even though I kept conning over phrases in which the pronoun could be employed--and employed more than once. All that I wanted was the courage to say it.

"Wilt THOU?" and "THY hand" sounded continually in my ears, and caused in me a kind of intoxication I could hear and see nothing but Sonetchka. I watched her mother take her curls, lay them flat behind her ears (thus disclosing portions of her forehead and temples which I had not yet seen), and wrap her up so completely in the green shawl that nothing was left visible but the tip of her nose. Indeed, I could see that, if her little rosy fingers had not made a small, opening near her mouth, she would have been unable to breathe. Finally I saw her leave her mother's arm for an instant on the staircase, and turn and nod to us quickly before she disappeared through the doorway.

Woloda, the Iwins, the young Prince Etienne, and myself were all of us in love with Sonetchka and all of us standing on the staircase to follow her with our eyes. To whom in particular she had nodded I do not know, but at the moment I firmly believed it to be myself. In taking leave of the Iwins, I spoke quite unconcernedly, and even coldly, to Seriosha before I finally shook hands with him. Though he tried to appear absolutely indifferent, I think that he understood that from that day forth he had lost both my affection and his power over me, as well as

that he regretted it.