

XXV -- THE LETTER

ON the 16th of April, nearly six months after the day just described, Papa entered our schoolroom and told us that that night we must start with him for our country house. I felt a pang at my heart when I heard the news, and my thoughts at once turned to Mamma, The cause of our unexpected departure was the following letter:

"PETROVSKOE, 12th April.

"Only this moment (i.e. at ten o'clock in the evening) have I received your dear letter of the 3rd of April, but as usual, I answer it at once. Fedor brought it yesterday from town, but, as it was late, he did not give it to Mimi till this morning, and Mimi (since I was unwell) kept it from me all day. I have been a little feverish. In fact, to tell the truth, this is the fourth day that I have been in bed.

"Yet do not be uneasy. I feel almost myself again now, and if Ivan Vassilitch should allow me, I think of getting up to-morrow.

"On Friday last I took the girls for a drive, and, close to the little bridge by the turning on to the high road (the place which always makes me nervous), the horses and carriage stuck fast in the mud. Well, the day being fine, I thought that we would walk a little up the road until the carriage should be extricated, but no sooner had we reached the chapel than I felt obliged to sit down, I was so tired, and in this way

half-an-hour passed while help was being sent for to get the carriage dug out. I felt cold, for I had only thin boots on, and they had been wet through. After luncheon too, I had alternate cold and hot fits, yet still continued to follow our ordinary routine.

"When tea was over I sat down to the piano to play a duct with Lubotshka, (you would be astonished to hear what progress she has made!), but imagine my surprise when I found that I could not count the beats! Several times I began to do so, yet always felt confused in my head, and kept hearing strange noises in my ears. I would begin 'One-two-three--' and then suddenly go on '-eight-fifteen,' and so on, as though I were talking nonsense and could not help it. At last Mimi came to my assistance and forced me to retire to bed. That was how my illness began, and it was all through my own fault. The next day I had a good deal of fever, and our good Ivan Vassilitch came. He has not left us since, but promises soon to restore me to the world.

"What a wonderful old man he is! While I was feverish and delirious he sat the whole night by my bedside without once closing his eyes; and at this moment (since he knows I am busy writing) he is with the girls in the divannaia, and I can hear him telling them German stories, and them laughing as they listen to him.

"'La Belle Flamande,' as you call her, is now spending her second week here as my guest (her mother having gone to pay a visit somewhere), and she is most attentive and attached to me, She even tells me her secret

affairs. Under different circumstances her beautiful face, good temper, and youth might have made a most excellent girl of her, but in the society in which according to her own account, she moves she will be wasted. The idea has more than once occurred to me that, had I not had so many children of my own, it would have been a deed of mercy to have adopted her.

"Lubotshka had meant to write to you herself, but she has torn up three sheets of paper, saying: 'I know what a quizzer Papa always is. If he were to find a single fault in my letter he would show it to everybody.' Katenka is as charming as usual, and Mimi, too, is good, but tiresome.

"Now let me speak of more serious matters. You write to me that your affairs are not going well this winter, and that you wish to break into the revenues of Chabarovska. It seems to me strange that you should think it necessary to ask my consent. Surely what belongs to me belongs no less to you? You are so kind-hearted, dear, that, for fear of worrying me, you conceal the real state of things, but I can guess that you have lost a great deal at cards, as also that you are afraid of my being angry at that. Yet, so long as you can tide over this crisis, I shall not think much of it, and you need not be uneasy, I have grown accustomed to no longer relying, so far as the children are concerned, upon your gains at play, nor yet--excuse me for saying so--upon your income. Therefore your losses cause me as little anxiety as your gains give me pleasure. What I really grieve over is your unhappy passion itself for gambling--a passion which bereaves me of part of your tender

affection and obliges me to tell you such bitter truths as (God knows with what pain) I am now telling you. I never cease to beseech Him that He may preserve us, not from poverty (for what is poverty?), but from the terrible juncture which would arise should the interests of the children, which I am called upon to protect, ever come into collision with our own. Hitherto God has listened to my prayers. You have never yet overstepped the limit beyond which we should be obliged either to sacrifice property which would no longer belong to us, but to the children, or--It is terrible to think of, but the dreadful misfortune at which I hint is forever hanging over our heads. Yes, it is the heavy cross which God has given us both to carry.

"Also, you write about the children, and come back to our old point of difference by asking my consent to your placing them at a boarding-school. You know my objection to that kind of education. I do not know, dear, whether you will accede to my request, but I nevertheless beseech you, by your love for me, to give me your promise that never so long as I am alive, nor yet after my death (if God should see fit to separate us), shall such a thing be done.

"Also you write that our affairs render it indispensable for you to visit St. Petersburg. The Lord go with you! Go and return as, soon as possible. Without you we shall all of us be lonely.

"Spring is coming in beautifully. We keep the door on to the terrace always open now, while the path to the orangery is dry and the

peach-trees are in full blossom. Only here and there is there a little snow remaining, The swallows are arriving, and to-day Lubotshka brought me the first flowers. The doctor says that in about three days' time I shall be well again and able to take the open air and to enjoy the April sun. Now, au revoir, my dearest one. Do not be alarmed, I beg of you, either on account of my illness or on account of your losses at play. End the crisis as soon as possible, and then return here with the children for the summer. I am making wonderful plans for our passing of it, and I only need your presence to realise them."

The rest of the letter was written in French, as well as in a strange, uncertain hand, on another piece of paper. I transcribe it word for word:

"Do not believe what I have just written to you about my illness. It is more serious than any one knows. I alone know that I shall never leave my bed again. Do not, therefore, delay a minute in coming here with the children. Perhaps it may yet be permitted me to embrace and bless them. It is my last wish that it should be so. I know what a terrible blow this will be to you, but you would have had to hear it sooner or later--if not from me, at least from others. Let us try to, bear the Calamity with fortitude, and place our trust in the mercy of God. Let us submit ourselves to His will. Do not think that what I am writing is some delusion of my sick imagination. On the contrary, I am perfectly clear at this moment, and absolutely calm. Nor must you comfort yourself with the false hope that these are the unreal, confused feelings of a

despondent spirit, for I feel indeed, I know, since God has deigned to reveal it to me--that I have now but a very short time to live. Will my love for you and the children cease with my life? I know that that can never be. At this moment I am too full of that love to be capable of believing that such a feeling (which constitutes a part of my very existence) can ever, perish. My soul can never lack its love for you; and I know that that love will exist for ever, since such a feeling could never have been awakened if it were not to be eternal. I shall no longer be with you, yet I firmly believe that my love will cleave to you always, and from that thought I glean such comfort that I await the approach of death calmly and without fear. Yes, I am calm, and God knows that I have ever looked, and do look now, upon death as no more than the passage to a better life. Yet why do tears blind my eyes? Why should the children lose a mother's love? Why must you, my husband, experience such a heavy and unlooked-for blow? Why must I die when your love was making life so inexpressibly happy for me?

"But His holy will be done!

"The tears prevent my writing more. It may be that I shall never see you again. I thank you, my darling beyond all price, for all the felicity with which you have surrounded me in this life. Soon I shall appear before God Himself to pray that He may reward you. Farewell, my dearest! Remember that, if I am no longer here, my love will none the less NEVER AND NOWHERE fail you. Farewell, Woloda--farewell, my pet! Farewell, my Benjamin, my little Nicolinka! Surely they will never forget me?"

With this letter had come also a French note from Mimi, in which the latter said:

"The sad circumstances of which she has written to you are but too surely confirmed by the words of the doctor. Yesterday evening she ordered the letter to be posted at once, but, thinking at she did so in delirium, I waited until this morning, with the intention of sealing and sending it then. Hardly had I done so when Natalia Nicolaevna asked me what I had done with the letter and told me to burn it if not yet despatched. She is forever speaking of it, and saying that it will kill you. Do not delay your departure for an instant if you wish to see the angel before she leaves us. Pray excuse this scribble, but I have not slept now for three nights. You know how much I love her."

Later I heard from Natalia Savishna (who passed the whole of the night of the 11th April at Mamma's bedside) that, after writing the first part of the letter, Mamma laid it down upon the table beside her and went to sleep for a while.

"I confess," said Natalia Savishna, "that I too fell asleep in the arm-chair, and let my knitting slip from my hands. Suddenly, towards one o'clock in the morning, I heard her saying something; whereupon I opened my eyes and looked at her. My darling was sitting up in bed, with her hands clasped together and streams of tears gushing from her eyes.

"It is all over now,' she said, and hid her face in her hands.

"I sprang to my feet, and asked what the matter was.

"Ah, Natalia Savishna, if you could only know what I have just seen!' she said; yet, for all my asking, she would say no more, beyond commanding me to hand her the letter. To that letter she added something, and then said that it must be sent off directly. From that moment she grew, rapidly worse."