

## XXVI -- WHAT AWAITED US AT THE COUNTRY-HOUSE

On the 18th of April we descended from the carriage at the front door of the house at Petrovskoe. All the way from Moscow Papa had been preoccupied, and when Woloda had asked him "whether Mamma was ill" he had looked at him sadly and nodded an affirmative. Nevertheless he had grown more composed during the journey, and it was only when we were actually approaching the house that his face again began to grow anxious, until, as he leaped from the carriage and asked Foka (who had run breathlessly to meet us), "How is Natalia Nicolaevna now?" his voice, was trembling, and his eyes had filled with tears. The good, old Foka looked at us, and then lowered his gaze again. Finally he said as he opened the hall-door and turned his head aside: "It is the sixth day since she has not left her bed."

Milka (who, as we afterwards learned, had never ceased to whine from the day when Mamma was taken ill) came leaping, joyfully to meet Papa, and barking a welcome as she licked his hands, but Papa put her aside, and went first to the drawing-room, and then into the divannaia, from which a door led into the bedroom. The nearer he approached the latter, the more, did his movements express the agitation that he felt. Entering the divannaia he crossed it on tiptoe, seeming to hold his breath. Even then he had to stop and make the sign of the cross before he could summon up courage to turn the handle. At the same moment Mimi, with dishevelled hair and eyes red with weeping came hastily out of the corridor.

"Ah, Peter Alexandritch!" she said in a whisper and with a marked expression of despair. Then, observing that Papa was trying to open the door, she whispered again:

"Not here. This door is locked. Go round to the door on the other side."

Oh, how terribly all this wrought upon my imagination, racked as it was by grief and terrible forebodings!

So we went round to the other side. In the corridor we met the gardener, Akim, who had been wont to amuse us with his grimaces, but at this moment I could see nothing comical in him. Indeed, the sight of his thoughtless, indifferent face struck me more painfully than anything else. In the maidservants' hall, through which we had to pass, two maids were sitting at their work, but rose to salute us with an expression so mournful that I felt completely overwhelmed.

Passing also through Mimi's room, Papa opened the door of the bedroom, and we entered. The two windows on the right were curtained over, and close to them was seated, Natalia Savishna, spectacles on nose and engaged in darning stockings. She did not approach us to kiss me as she had been used to do, but just rose and looked at us, her tears beginning to flow afresh. Somehow it frightened me to see every one, on beholding us, begin to cry, although they had been calm enough before.

On the left stood the bed behind a screen, while in the great arm-chair

the doctor lay asleep. Beside the bed a young, fair-haired and remarkably beautiful girl in a white morning wrapper was applying ice to Mamma's head, but Mamma herself I could not see. This girl was "La Belle Flamande" of whom Mamma had written, and who afterwards played so important a part in our family life. As we entered she disengaged one of her hands, straightened the pleats of her dress on her bosom, and whispered, "She is insensible." Though I was in an agony of grief, I observed at that moment every little detail.

It was almost dark in the room, and very hot, while the air was heavy with the mingled, scent of mint, eau-de-cologne, camomile, and Hoffman's pastilles. The latter ingredient caught my attention so strongly that even now I can never hear of it, or even think of it, without my memory carrying me back to that dark, close room, and all the details of that dreadful time.

Mamma's eyes were wide open, but they could not see us. Never shall I forget the terrible expression in them--the expression of agonies of suffering!

Then we were taken away.

When, later, I was able to ask Natalia Savishna about Mamma's last moments she told me the following:

"After you were taken out of the room, my beloved one struggled for a

long time, as though some one were trying to strangle her. Then at last she laid her head back upon the pillow, and slept softly, peacefully, like an angel from Heaven. I went away for a moment to see about her medicine, and just as I entered the room again my darling was throwing the bedclothes from off her and calling for your Papa. He stooped over her, but strength failed her to say what she wanted to. All she could do was to open her lips and gasp, 'My God, my God! The children, the children!' I would have run to fetch you, but Ivan Vassilitch stopped me, saying that it would only excite her--it were best not to do so. Then suddenly she stretched her arms out and dropped them again. What she meant by that gesture the good God alone knows, but I think that in it she was blessing you--you the children whom she could not see. God did not grant her to see her little ones before her death. Then she raised herself up--did my love, my darling--yes, just so with her hands, and exclaimed in a voice which I cannot bear to remember, 'Mother of God, never forsake them!'"

"Then the pain mounted to her heart, and from her eyes it as, plain that she suffered terribly, my poor one! She sank back upon the pillows, tore the bedclothes with her teeth, and wept--wept--"

"Yes and what then?" I asked but Natalia Savishna could say no more. She turned away and cried bitterly.

Mamma had expired in terrible agonies.