

XXVII -- GRIEF

LATE the following evening I thought I would like to look at her once more; so, conquering an involuntary sense of fear, I gently opened the door of the salon and entered on tiptoe.

In the middle of the room, on a table, lay the coffin, with wax candles burning all round it on tall silver candelabra. In the further corner sat the chanter, reading the Psalms in a low, monotonous voice. I stopped at the door and tried to look, but my eyes were so weak with crying, and my nerves so terribly on edge, that I could distinguish nothing. Every object seemed to mingle together in a strange blur--the candles, the brocade, the velvet, the great candelabra, the pink satin cushion trimmed with lace, the chaplet of flowers, the ribboned cap, and something of a transparent, wax-like colour. I mounted a chair to see her face, yet where it should have been I could see only that wax-like, transparent something. I could not believe it to be her face. Yet, as I stood gazing at it, I at last recognised the well-known, beloved features. I shuddered with horror to realise that it WAS she. Why were those eyes so sunken? What had laid that dreadful paleness upon her cheeks, and stamped the black spot beneath the transparent skin on one of them? Why was the expression of the whole face so cold and severe? Why were the lips so white, and their outline so beautiful, so majestic, so expressive of an unnatural calm that, as I looked at them, a chill shudder ran through my hair and down my back?

Somehow, as I gazed, an irrepressible, incomprehensible power seemed to compel me to keep my eyes fixed upon that lifeless face. I could not turn away, and my imagination began to picture before me scenes of her active life and happiness. I forgot that the corpse lying before me now--the THING at which I was gazing unconsciously as at an object which had nothing in common with my dreams--was SHE. I fancied I could see her--now here, now there, alive, happy, and smiling. Then some well-known feature in the face at which I was gazing would suddenly arrest my attention, and in a flash I would recall the terrible reality and shudder--though still unable to turn my eyes away.

Then again the dreams would replace reality--then again the reality put to flight the dreams. At last the consciousness of both left me, and for a while I became insensible.

How long I remained in that condition I do not know, nor yet how it occurred. I only know that for a time I lost all sense of existence, and experienced a kind of vague blissfulness which though grand and sweet, was also sad. It may be that, as it ascended to a better world, her beautiful soul had looked down with longing at the world in which she had left us--that it had seen my sorrow, and, pitying me, had returned to earth on the wings of love to console and bless me with a heavenly smile of compassion.

The door creaked as the chanter entered who was to relieve his predecessor. The noise awakened me, and my first thought was that,

seeing me standing on the chair in a posture which had nothing touching in its aspect, he might take me for an unfeeling boy who had climbed on to the chair out of mere curiosity: wherefore I hastened to make the sign of the cross, to bend down my head, and to burst out crying. As I recall now my impressions of that episode I find that it was only during my moments of self-forgetfulness that my grief was wholehearted. True, both before and after the funeral I never ceased to cry and to look miserable, yet I feel conscience-stricken when I recall that grief of mine, seeing that always present in it there was an element of conceit--of a desire to show that I was more grieved than any one else, of an interest which I took in observing the effect, produced upon others by my tears, and of an idle curiosity leading me to remark Mimi's bonnet and the faces of all present. The mere circumstance that I despised myself for not feeling grief to the exclusion of everything else, and that I endeavoured to conceal the fact, shows that my sadness was insincere and unnatural. I took a delight in feeling that I was unhappy, and in trying to feel more so. Consequently this egotistic consciousness completely annulled any element of sincerity in my woe.

That night I slept calmly and soundly (as is usual after any great emotion), and awoke with my tears dried and my nerves restored. At ten o'clock we were summoned to attend the pre-funeral requiem.

The room was full of weeping servants and peasants who had come to bid farewell to their late mistress. During the service I myself wept a great deal, made frequent signs of the cross, and performed many

genuflections, but I did not pray with, my soul, and felt, if anything, almost indifferent, My thoughts were chiefly centred upon the new coat which I was wearing (a garment which was tight and uncomfortable) and upon how to avoid soiling my trousers at the knees. Also I took the most minute notice of all present.

Papa stood at the head of the coffin. He was as white as snow, and only with difficulty restrained his tears. His tall figure in its black frockcoat, his pale, expressive face, the graceful, assured manner in which, as usual, he made the sign of the cross or bowed until he touched the floor with his hand [A custom of the Greek funeral rite.] or took the candle from the priest or went to the coffin--all were exceedingly effective; yet for some reason or another I felt a grudge against him for that very ability to appear effective at such a moment. Mimi stood leaning against the wall as though scarcely able to support herself. Her dress was all awry and covered with feathers, and her cap cocked to one side, while her eyes were red with weeping, her legs trembling under her, and she sobbed incessantly in a heartrending manner as ever and again she buried her face in her handkerchief or her hands. I imagine that she did this to check her continual sobbing without being seen by the spectators. I remember, too, her telling Papa, the evening before, that Mamma's death had come upon her as a blow from which she could never hope to recover; that with Mamma she had lost everything; but that "the angel," as she called my mother, had not forgotten her when at the point of death, since she had declared her wish to render her (Mimi's) and Katenka's fortunes secure for ever. Mimi had shed bitter tears

while relating this, and very likely her sorrow, if not wholly pure and disinterested, was in the main sincere. Lubotshka, in black garments and suffused with tears, stood with her head bowed upon her breast. She rarely looked at the coffin, yet whenever she did so her face expressed a sort of childish fear. Katenka stood near her mother, and, despite her lengthened face, looked as lovely as ever. Woloda's frank nature was frank also in grief. He stood looking grave and as though he were staring at some object with fixed eyes. Then suddenly his lips would begin to quiver, and he would hastily make the sign of the cross, and bend his head again.

Such of those present as were strangers I found intolerable. In fact, the phrases of condolence with which they addressed Papa (such, for instance, as that "she is better off now" "she was too good for this world," and so on) awakened in me something like fury. What right had they to weep over or to talk about her? Some of them, in referring to ourselves, called us "orphans"--just as though it were not a matter of common knowledge that children who have lost their mother are known as orphans! Probably (I thought) they liked to be the first to give us that name, just as some people find pleasure in being the first to address a newly-married girl as "Madame."

In a far corner of the room, and almost hidden by the open door, of the dining-room, stood a grey old woman with bent knees. With hands clasped together and eyes lifted to heaven, she prayed only--not wept. Her soul was in the presence of God, and she was asking Him soon to reunite her

to her whom she had loved beyond all beings on this earth, and whom she steadfastly believed that she would very soon meet again.

"There stands one who SINCERELY loved her," I thought to myself, and felt ashamed.

The requiem was over. They uncovered the face of the deceased, and all present except ourselves went to the coffin to give her the kiss of farewell.

One of the last to take leave of her departed mistress was a peasant woman who was holding by the hand a pretty little girl of five whom she had brought with her, God knows for what reason. Just at a moment when I chanced to drop my wet handkerchief and was stooping to pick it up again, a loud, piercing scream startled me, and filled me with such terror that, were I to live a hundred years more, I should never forget it. Even now the recollection always sends a cold shudder through my frame. I raised my head. Standing on the chair near the coffin was the peasant woman, while struggling and fighting in her arms was the little girl, and it was this same poor child who had screamed with such dreadful, desperate frenzy as, straining her terrified face away, she still, continued to gaze with dilated eyes at the face of the corpse. I too screamed in a voice perhaps more dreadful still, and ran headlong from the room.

Only now did I understand the source of the strong, oppressive smell

which, mingling with the scent of the incense, filled the chamber, while the thought that the face which, but a few days ago, had been full of freshness and beauty--the face which I loved more than anything else in all the world--was now capable of inspiring horror at length revealed to me, as though for the first time, the terrible truth, and filled my soul with despair.