

#### IV. OUR FAMILY CIRCLE

PAPA was seldom at home that spring. Yet, whenever he was so, he seemed extraordinarily cheerful as he either strummed his favourite pieces on the piano or looked roguishly at us and made jokes about us all, not excluding even Mimi. For instance, he would say that the Tsarevitch himself had seen Mimi at the rink, and fallen so much in love with her that he had presented a petition to the Synod for divorce; or else that I had been granted an appointment as secretary to the Austrian ambassador--a piece of news which he imparted to us with a perfectly grave face. Next, he would frighten Katenka with some spiders (of which she was very much afraid), engage in an animated conversation with our friends Dubkoff and Nechludoff, and tell us and our guests, over and over again, his plans for the year. Although these plans changed almost from day to day, and were for ever contradicting one another, they seemed so attractive that we were always glad to listen to them, and Lubotshka, in particular, would glue her eyes to his face, so as not to lose a single word. One day his plan would be that he should leave my brother and myself at the University, and go and live with Lubotshka in Italy for two years. Next, the plan would be that he should buy an estate on the south coast of the Crimea, and take us for an annual visit there; next, that we should migrate en masse to St. Petersburg; and so forth. Yet, in addition to this unusual cheerfulness of his, another change had come over him of late--a change which greatly surprised me. This was that he had had some fashionable clothes made--an olive-coloured frockcoat, smart trousers with straps at the sides, and a

long wadded greatcoat which fitted him to perfection. Often, too, there was a delightful smell of scent about him when he came home from a party--more especially when he had been to see a lady of whom Mimi never spoke but with a sigh and a face that seemed to say: "Poor orphans! How dreadful! It is a good thing that SHE is gone now!" and so on, and so on. From Nicola (for Papa never spoke to us of his gambling) I had learnt that he (Papa) had been very fortunate in play that winter, and so had won an extraordinary amount of money, all of which he had placed in the bank after vowing that he would play no more that spring. Evidently, it was his fear of being unable to resist again doing so that was rendering him anxious to leave for the country as soon as possible. Indeed, he ended by deciding not to wait until I had entered the University, but to take the girls to Petrovskoe immediately after Easter, and to leave Woloda and myself to follow them at a later season.

All that winter, until the opening of spring, Woloda had been inseparable from Dubkoff, while at the same time the pair of them had cooled greatly towards Dimitri. Their chief amusements (so I gathered from conversations overheard) were continual drinking of champagne, sledge-driving past the windows of a lady with whom both of them appeared to be in love, and dancing with her--not at children's parties, either, but at real balls! It was this last fact which, despite our love for one another, placed a vast gulf between Woloda and myself. We felt that the distance between a boy still taking lessons under a tutor and a man who danced at real, grown-up balls was too great to allow of their exchanging mutual ideas. Katenka, too, seemed grown-up now, and read

innumerable novels; so that the idea that she would some day be getting married no longer seemed to me a joke. Yet, though she and Woloda were thus grown-up, they never made friends with one another, but, on the contrary, seemed to cherish a mutual contempt. In general, when Katenka was at home alone, nothing but novels amused her, and they but slightly; but as soon as ever a visitor of the opposite sex called, she at once grew lively and amiable, and used her eyes for saying things which I could not then understand. It was only later, when she one day informed me in conversation that the only thing a girl was allowed to indulge in was coquetry--coquetry of the eyes, I mean--that I understood those strange contortions of her features which to every one else had seemed a matter for no surprise at all. Lubotshka also had begun to wear what was almost a long dress--a dress which almost concealed her goose-shaped feet; yet she still remained as ready a weeper as ever. She dreamed now of marrying, not a hussar, but a singer or an instrumentalist, and accordingly applied herself to her music with greater diligence than ever. St. Jerome, who knew that he was going to remain with us only until my examinations were over, and so had obtained for himself a new post in the family of some count or another, now looked with contempt upon the members of our household. He stayed indoors very little, took to smoking cigarettes (then all the rage), and was for ever whistling lively tunes on the edge of a card. Mimi daily grew more and more despondent, as though, now that we were beginning to grow up, she looked for nothing good from any one or anything.

When, on the day of which I am speaking, I went in to luncheon I found

only Mimi, Katenka, Lubotshka, and St. Jerome in the dining-room. Papa was away, and Woloda in his own room, doing some preparation work for his examinations in company with a party of his comrades: wherefore he had requested that lunch should be sent to him there. Of late, Mimi had usually taken the head of the table, and as none of us had any respect for her, luncheon had lost most of its refinement and charm. That is to say, the meal was no longer what it had been in Mamma's or our grandmother's time, namely, a kind of rite which brought all the family together at a given hour and divided the day into two halves. We allowed ourselves to come in as late as the second course, to drink wine in tumblers (St. Jerome himself set us the example), to roll about on our chairs, to depart without saying grace, and so on. In fact, luncheon had ceased to be a family ceremony. In the old days at Petrovskoe, every one had been used to wash and dress for the meal, and then to repair to the drawing-room as the appointed hour (two o'clock) drew near, and pass the time of waiting in lively conversation. Just as the clock in the servants' hall was beginning to whirr before striking the hour, Foka would enter with noiseless footsteps, and, throwing his napkin over his arm and assuming a dignified, rather severe expression, would say in loud, measured tones: "Luncheon is ready!" Thereupon, with pleased, cheerful faces, we would form a procession--the elders going first and the juniors following, and, with much rustling of starched petticoats and subdued creaking of boots and shoes--would proceed to the dining-room, where, still talking in undertones, the company would seat themselves in their accustomed places. Or, again, at Moscow, we would all of us be standing before the table ready-laid in the hall, talking

quietly among ourselves as we waited for our grandmother, whom the butler, Gabriel, had gone to acquaint with the fact that luncheon was ready. Suddenly the door would open, there would come the faint swish of a dress and the sound of footsteps, and our grandmother--dressed in a mob-cap trimmed with a quaint old lilac bow, and wearing either a smile or a severe expression on her face according as the state of her health inclined her--would issue from her room. Gabriel would hasten to precede her to her arm-chair, the other chairs would make a scraping sound, and, with a feeling as though a cold shiver (the precursor of appetite) were running down one's back, one would seize upon one's damp, starched napkin, nibble a morsel or two of bread, and, rubbing one's hands softly under the table, gaze with eager, radiant impatience at the steaming plates of soup which the butler was beginning to dispense in order of ranks and ages or according to the favour of our grandmother.

On the present occasion, however, I was conscious of neither excitement nor pleasure when I went in to luncheon. Even the mingled chatter of Mimi, the girls, and St. Jerome about the horrible boots of our Russian tutor, the pleated dresses worn by the young Princesses Kornakoff, and so forth (chatter which at any other time would have filled me with a sincerity of contempt which I should have been at no pains to conceal--at all events so far as Lubotshka and Katenka were concerned), failed to shake the benevolent frame of mind into which I had fallen. I was unusually good-humoured that day, and listened to everything with a smile and a studied air of kindness. Even when I asked for the kvas I did so politely, while I lost not a moment in agreeing with St. Jerome

when he told me that it was undoubtedly more correct to say "Je peux" than "Je puis." Yet, I must confess to a certain disappointment at finding that no one paid any particular attention to my politeness and good-humour. After luncheon, Lubotshka showed me a paper on which she had written down a list of her sins: upon which I observed that, although the idea was excellent so far as it went, it would be still better for her to write down her sins on her SOUL--"a very different matter."

"Why is it 'a very different matter'?" asked Lubotshka.

"Never mind: that is all right; you do not understand me," and I went upstairs to my room, telling St. Jerome that I was going to work, but in reality purposing to occupy the hour and a half before confession time in writing down a list of my daily tasks and duties which should last me all my life, together with a statement of my life's aim, and the rules by which I meant unswervingly to be guided.