

XVIII. THE VALAKHIN FAMILY

Accordingly I set off alone. My first call on the route lay at the Valakhin mansion. It was now three years since I had seen Sonetchka, and my love for her had long become a thing of the past, yet there still lingered in my heart a sort of clear, touching recollection of our bygone childish affection. At intervals, also, during those three years, I had found myself recalling her memory with such force and vividness that I had actually shed tears, and imagined myself to be in love with her again, but those occasions had not lasted more than a few minutes at a time, and had been long in recurring.

I knew that Sonetchka and her mother had been abroad--that, in fact, they had been so for the last two years. Also, I had heard that they had been in a carriage accident, and that Sonetchka's face had been so badly cut with the broken glass that her beauty was marred. As I drove to their house, I kept recalling the old Sonetchka to my mind, and wondering what she would look like when I met her. Somehow I imagined that, after her two years' sojourn abroad, she would look very tall, with a beautiful waist, and, though sedate and imposing, extremely attractive. Somehow, also, my imagination refused to picture her with her face disfigured with scars, but, on the contrary, since I had read somewhere of a lover who remained true to his adored one in spite of her disfigurement with smallpox, strove to imagine that I was in love with Sonetchka, for the purpose of priding myself on holding to my troth in spite of her scars--Yet, as a matter of fact, I was not really in love

with her during that drive, but having once stirred up in myself old MEMORIES of love, felt PREPARED to fall into that condition, and the more so because, of late, my conscience had often been pricking me for having discarded so many of my old flames.

The Valakhins lived in a neat little wooden mansion approached by a courtyard. I gained admittance by ringing a bell (then a rarity in Moscow), and was received by a mincing, smartly-attired page. He either could not or made no attempt to inform me whether there was any one at home, but, leaving me alone in the dark hall, ran off down a still darker corridor. For a long time I waited in solitude in this gloomy place, out of which, in addition to the front door and the corridor, there only opened a door which at the moment was closed. Rather surprised at the dismal appearance of the house, I came to the conclusion that the reason was that its inmates were still abroad. After five minutes, however, the door leading into the salon was opened by the page boy, who then conducted me into a neat, but not richly furnished, drawing-room, where presently I was joined by Sonetchka.

She was now seventeen years old, and very small and thin, as well as of an unhealthy pallor of face. No scars at all were visible, however, and the beautiful, prominent eyes and bright, cheerful smile were the same as I had known and loved in my childhood. I had not expected her to look at all like this, and therefore could not at once lavish upon her the sentiment which I had been preparing on the way. She gave me her hand in the English fashion (which was then as much a novelty as a door-bell),

and, bestowing upon mine a frank squeeze, sat down on the sofa by my side.

"Ah! how glad I am to see you, my dear Nicolas!" she said as she looked me in the face with an expression of pleasure so sincere that in the words "my dear Nicolas" I caught the purely friendly rather than the patronising note. To my surprise she seemed to me simpler, kinder, and more sisterly after her foreign tour than she had been before it. True, I could now see that she had two small scars between her nose and temples, but her wonderful eyes and smile fitted in exactly with my recollections, and shone as of old.

"But how greatly you have changed!" she went on. "You are quite grown-up now. And I-I-well, what do you think of me?"

"I should never have known you," I replied, despite the fact that at the moment I was thinking that I should have known her anywhere and always.

"Why? Am I grown so ugly?" she inquired with a movement of her head.

"Oh, no, decidedly not!" I hastened to reply. "But you have grown taller and older. As for being uglier, why, you are even--"

"Yes, yes; never mind. Do you remember our dances and games, and St. Jerome, and Madame Dorat?" (As a matter of fact, I could not recollect any Madame Dorat, but saw that Sonetchka was being led away by the joy

of her childish recollections, and mixing them up a little). "Ah! what a lovely time it was!" she went on--and once more there shone before me the same eyes and smile as I had always carried in my memory. While she had been speaking, I had been thinking over my position at the present moment, and had come to the conclusion that I was in love with her. The instant, however, that I arrived at that result my careless, happy mood vanished, a mist seemed to arise before me which concealed even her eyes and smile, and, blushing hotly, I became tongue-tied and ill-at-ease.

"But times are different now," she went on with a sigh and a little lifting of her eyebrows. "Everything seems worse than it used to be, and ourselves too. Is it not so, Nicolas?"

I could return her no answer, but sat silently looking at her.

"Where are those Iwins and Kornakoffs now? Do you remember them?" she continued, looking, I think, with some curiosity at my blushing, downcast countenance. "What splendid times we used to have!"

Still I could not answer her.

The next moment, I was relieved from this awkward position by the entry of old Madame Valakhin into the room. Rising, I bowed, and straightway recovered my faculty of speech. On the other hand, an extraordinary change now took place in Sonetchka. All her gaiety and bonhomie disappeared, her smile became quite a different one, and, except for the

point of her shortness of stature, she became just the lady from abroad whom I had expected to find in her. Yet for this change there was no apparent reason, since her mother smiled every whit as pleasantly, and expressed in her every movement just the same benignity, as of old. Seating herself in her arm-chair, the old lady signed to me to come and sit beside her; after which she said something to her daughter in English, and Sonetchka left the room--a fact which still further helped to relieve me. Madame then inquired after my father and brother, and passed on to speak of her great bereavement--the loss of her husband. Presently, however, she seemed to become sensible of the fact that I was not helping much in the conversation, for she gave me a look as much as to say: "If, now, my dear boy, you were to get up, to take your leave, and to depart, it would be well." But a curious circumstance had overtaken me. While she had been speaking of her bereavement, I had recalled to myself, not only the fact that I was in love, but the probability that the mother knew of it: whereupon such a fit of bashfulness had come upon me that I felt powerless to put any member of my body to its legitimate use. I knew that if I were to rise and walk I should have to think where to plant each foot, what to do with my head, what with my hands, and so on. In a word, I foresaw that I should be very much as I had been on the night when I partook too freely of champagne, and therefore, since I felt uncertain of being able to manage myself if I DID rise, I ended by feeling UNABLE to rise. Meanwhile, I should say, Sonetchka had returned to the room with her work, and seated herself in a far corner--a corner whence, as I was nevertheless sensible, she could observe me. Madame must have felt some surprise as

she gazed at my crimson face and noted my complete immobility, but I decided that it was better to continue sitting in that absurd position than to risk something unpleasant by getting up and walking. Thus I sat on and on, in the hope that some unforeseen chance would deliver me from my predicament. That unforeseen chance at length presented itself in the person of an unforeseen young man, who entered the room with an air of being one of the household, and bowed to me politely as he did so: whereupon Madame rose, excused herself to me for having to speak with her "homme d'affaires," and finally gave me a glance which said: "Well, if you DO mean to go on sitting there for ever, at least I can't drive you away." Accordingly, with a great effort I also rose, but, finding it impossible to do any leave-taking, moved away towards the door, followed by the pitying glances of mother and daughter. All at once I stumbled over a chair, although it was lying quite out of my route: the reason for my stumbling being that my whole attention was centred upon not tripping over the carpet. Driving through the fresh air, however--where at first I muttered and fidgeted about so much that Kuzma, my coachman, asked me what was the matter--I soon found this feeling pass away, and began to meditate quietly concerning my love for Sonetchka and her relations with her mother, which had appeared to me rather strange. When, afterwards, I told my father that mother and daughter had not seemed on the best of terms with one another, he said:

"Yes, Madame leads the poor girl an awful life with her meanness. Yet," added my father with a greater display of feeling than a man might naturally conceive for a mere relative, "she used to be such an

original, dear, charming woman! I cannot think what has made her change so much. By the way, you didn't notice a secretary fellow about, did you? Fancy a Russian lady having an affaire with a secretary!"

"Yes, I saw him," I replied.

"And was he at least good-looking?"

"No, not at all."

"It is extraordinary!" concluded Papa, with a cough and an irritable hoist of his shoulder.

"Well, I am in love!" was my secret thought to myself as I drove along in my drozhki.