

XXVIII. IN THE COUNTRY

Next day Woloda and myself departed in a post-chaise for the country. Turning over various Moscow recollections in my head as we drove along, I suddenly recalled Sonetchka Valakhin--though not until evening, and when we had already covered five stages of the road. "It is a strange thing," I thought, "that I should be in love, and yet have forgotten all about it. I must start and think about her," and straightway I proceeded to do so, but only in the way that one thinks when travelling--that is to say, disconnectedly, though vividly. Thus I brought myself to such a condition that, for the first two days after our arrival home, I somehow considered it incumbent upon me always to appear sad and moody in the presence of the household, and especially before Katenka, whom I looked upon as a great connoisseur in matters of this kind, and to whom I threw out a hint of the condition in which my heart was situated. Yet, for all my attempts at dissimulation and assiduous adoption of such signs of love sickness as I had occasionally observed in other people, I only succeeded for two days (and that at intervals, and mostly towards evening) in reminding myself of the fact that I was in love, and finally, when I had settled down into the new rut of country life and pursuits, I forgot about my affection for Sonetchka altogether.

We arrived at Petrovskoe in the night time, and I was then so soundly asleep that I saw nothing of the house as we approached it, nor yet of the avenue of birch trees, nor yet of the household--all of whom had long ago betaken themselves to bed and to slumber. Only old hunchbacked

Foka--bare-footed, clad in some sort of a woman's wadded nightdress, and carrying a candlestick--opened the door to us. As soon as he saw who we were, he trembled all over with joy, kissed us on the shoulders, hurriedly put on his felt slippers, and started to dress himself properly. I passed in a semi-waking condition through the porch and up the steps, but in the hall the lock of the door, the bars and bolts, the crooked boards of the flooring, the chest, the ancient candelabrum (splashed all over with grease as of old), the shadows thrown by the crooked, chill, recently-lighted stump of candle, the perennially dusty, unopened window behind which I remembered sorrel to have grown--all was so familiar, so full of memories, so intimate of aspect, so, as it were, knit together by a single idea, that I suddenly became conscious of a tenderness for this quiet old house. Involuntarily I asked myself, "How have we, the house and I, managed to remain apart so long?" and, hurrying from spot to spot, ran to see if all the other rooms were still the same. Yes, everything was unchanged, except that everything had become smaller and lower, and I myself taller, heavier, and more filled out. Yet, even as I was, the old house received me back into its arms, and aroused in me with every board, every window, every step of the stairs, and every sound the shadows of forms, feelings, and events of the happy but irrevocable past. When we entered our old night nursery, all my childish fears lurked once more in the darkness of the corners and doorway. When we passed into the drawing-room, I could feel the old calm motherly love diffusing itself from every object in the apartment. In the breakfast-room, the noisy, careless merriment of childhood seemed merely to be waiting to wake to life again. In the divannaia

(whither Foka first conducted us, and where he had prepared our beds) everything--mirror, screen, old wooden ikon, the lumps on the walls covered with white paper--seemed to speak of suffering and of death and of what would never come back to us again.

We got into bed, and Foka, bidding us good-night, retired.

"It was in this room that Mamma died, was it not?" said Woloda.

I made no reply, but pretended to be asleep. If I had said anything I should have burst into tears. On awaking next morning, I beheld Papa sitting on Woloda's bed in his dressing gown and slippers and smoking a cigar. Leaping up with a merry hoist of the shoulders, he came over to me, slapped me on the back with his great hand, and presented me his cheek to press my lips to.

"Well done, DIPLOMAT!" he said in his most kindly jesting tone as he looked at me with his small bright eyes. "Woloda tells me you have passed the examinations well for a youngster, and that is a splendid thing. Unless you start and play the fool, I shall have another fine little fellow in you. Thanks, my dear boy. Well, we will have a grand time of it here now, and in the winter, perhaps, we shall move to St. Petersburg. I only wish the hunting was not over yet, or I could have given you some amusement in THAT way. Can you shoot, Woldemar? However, whether there is any game or not, I will take you out some day. Next winter, if God pleases, we will move to St. Petersburg, and you shall

meet people, and make friends, for you are now my two young grown-ups. I have been telling Woldemar that you are just starting on your careers, whereas my day is ended. You are old enough now to walk by yourselves, but, whenever you wish to confide in me, pray do so, for I am no longer your nurse, but your friend. At least, I will be your friend and comrade and adviser as much as I can and more than that I cannot do. How does that fall in with your philosophy, eh, Koko? Well or ill, eh?"

Of course I said that it fell in with it entirely, and, indeed, I really thought so. That morning Papa had a particularly winning, bright, and happy expression on his face, and these new relations between us, as of equals and comrades, made me love him all the more.

"Now, tell me," he went on, "did you call upon all our kinsfolk and the Iwins? Did you see the old man, and what did he say to you? And did you go to Prince Ivan's?"

We continued talking so long that, before we were fully dressed, the sun had left the window of the divannaia, and Jakoff (the same old man who of yore had twirled his fingers behind his back and always repeated his words) had entered the room and reported to Papa that the carriage was ready.

"Where are you going to?" I asked Papa.

"Oh, I had forgotten all about it!" he replied, with a cough and

the usual hoisting of his shoulder. "I promised to go and call upon Epifanova to-day. You remember Epifanova--'la belle Flamande'--don't you, who used to come and see your Mamma? They are nice people." And with a self-conscious shrug of his shoulders (so it appeared to me) Papa left the room.

During our conversation, Lubotshka had more than once come to the door and asked "Can I come in?" but Papa had always shouted to her that she could not do so, since we were not dressed yet.

"What rubbish!" she replied. "Why, I have seen you in your dressing-gown."

"Never mind; you cannot see your brothers without their inexpressibles," rejoined Papa. "If they each of them just go to the door, let that be enough for you. Now go. Even for them to SPEAK to you in such a negligé costume is unbecoming."

"How unbearable you are!" was Lubotshka's parting retort. "Well, at least hurry up and come down to the drawing-room, for Mimi wants to see them."

As soon as Papa had left the room, I hastened to array myself in my student's uniform, and to repair to the drawing-room.

Woloda, on the other hand, was in no hurry, but remained sitting on

his bed and talking to Jakoff about the best places to find plover and snipe. As I have said, there was nothing in the world he so much feared as to be suspected of any affection for his father, brother, and sister; so that, to escape any expression of that feeling, he often fell into the other extreme, and affected a coldness which shocked people who did not comprehend its cause. In the hall, I collided with Papa, who was hurrying towards the carriage with short, rapid steps. He had a new and fashionable Moscow greatcoat on, and smelt of scent. On seeing me, he gave a cheerful nod, as much as to say, "Do you remark my splendour?" and once again I was struck with the happy expression of face which I had noted earlier in the morning.

The drawing-room looked the same lofty, bright room as of Yore, with its brown English piano, and its large open windows looking on to the green trees and yellowish-red paths of the garden. After kissing Mimi and Lubotshka, I was approaching Katenka for the same purpose when it suddenly struck me that it might be improper for me to salute her in that fashion. Accordingly I halted, silent and blushing. Katenka, for her part, was quite at her ease as she held out a white hand to me and congratulated me on my passing into the University. The same thing took place when Woloda entered the drawing-room and met Katenka. Indeed, it was something of a problem how, after being brought up together and seeing one another daily, we ought now, after this first separation, to meet again. Katenka had grown better-looking than any of us, yet Woloda seemed not at all confused as, with a slight bow to her, he crossed over to Lubotshka, made a jesting remark to her, and then departed somewhere

on some solitary expedition.