

XXXII. YOUTH

Despite the confusion of ideas raging in my head, I was at least young, innocent, and free that summer--consequently almost happy.

Sometimes I would rise quite early in the morning, for I slept on the open verandah, and the bright, horizontal beams of the morning sun would wake me up. Dressing myself quickly, I would tuck a towel and a French novel under my arm, and go off to bathe in the river in the shade of a birch tree which stood half a verst from the house. Next, I would stretch myself on the grass and read--raising my eyes from time to time to look at the surface of the river where it showed blue in the shade of the trees, at the ripples caused by the first morning breeze, at the yellowing field of rye on the further bank, and at the bright-red sheen of the sunlight as it struck lower and lower down the white trunks of the birch-trees which, ranged in ranks one behind the other, gradually receded into the remote distance of the home park. At such moments I would feel joyously conscious of having within me the same young, fresh force of life as nature was everywhere exuding around me. When, however, the sky was overcast with grey clouds of morning and I felt chilly after bathing, I would often start to walk at random through the fields and woods, and joyously trail my wet boots in the fresh dew. All the while my head would be filled with vivid dreams concerning the heroes of my last-read novel, and I would keep picturing to myself some leader of an army or some statesman or marvellously strong man or devoted lover or another, and looking round me in, a nervous expectation that I should

suddenly descry HER somewhere near me, in a meadow or behind a tree. Yet, whenever these rambles led me near peasants engaged at their work, all my ignoring of the existence of the "common people" did not prevent me from experiencing an involuntary, overpowering sensation of awkwardness; so that I always tried to avoid their seeing me. When the heat of the day had increased, it was not infrequently my habit--if the ladies did not come out of doors for their morning tea--to go rambling through the orchard and kitchen-garden, and to pluck ripe fruit there. Indeed, this was an occupation which furnished me with one of my greatest pleasures. Let any one go into an orchard, and dive into the midst of a tall, thick, sprouting raspberry-bed. Above will be seen the clear, glowing sky, and, all around, the pale-green, prickly stems of raspberry-trees where they grow mingled together in a tangle of profusion. At one's feet springs the dark-green nettle, with its slender crown of flowers, while the broad-leaved burdock, with its bright-pink, prickly blossoms, overtops the raspberries (and even one's head) with its luxuriant masses, until, with the nettle, it almost meets the pendent, pale-green branches of the old apple-trees where apples, round and lustrous as bone, but as yet unripe, are mellowing in the heat of the sun. Below, again, are seen young raspberry-shoots, twining themselves around the partially withered, leafless parent plant, and stretching their tendrils towards the sunlight, with green, needle-shaped blades of grass and young, dew-coated pods peering through last year's leaves, and growing juicily green in the perennial shade, as though they care nothing for the bright sunshine which is playing on the leaves of the apple-trees above them. In this density there is always

moisture--always a smell of confined, perpetual shade, of cobwebs, fallen apples (turning black where they roll on the mouldy sod), raspberries, and earwigs of the kind which impel one to reach hastily for more fruit when one has inadvertently swallowed a member of that insect tribe with the last berry. At every step one's movements keep flushing the sparrows which always make their home in these depths, and one hears their fussy chirping and the beating of their tiny, fluttering wings against the stalks, and catches the low buzzing of a bumble bee somewhere, and the sound of the gardener's footsteps (it is half-daft Akim) on the path as he hums his eternal sing-song to himself. Then one mutters under one's breath, "No! Neither he nor any one else shall find me here!" yet still one goes on stripping juicy berries from their conical white pilasters, and cramming them into one's mouth. At length, one's legs soaked to the knees as one repeats, over and over again, some rubbish which keeps running in one's head, and one's hands and nether limbs (despite the protection of one's wet trousers) thoroughly stung with the nettles, one comes to the conclusion that the sun's rays are beating too straight upon one's head for eating to be any longer desirable, and, sinking down into the tangle of greenery, one remains there--looking and listening, and continuing in mechanical fashion to strip off one or two of the finer berries and swallow them.

At eleven o'clock--that is to say, when the ladies had taken their morning tea and settled down to their occupations--I would repair to the drawing-room. Near the first window, with its unbleached linen blind lowered to exclude the sunshine, but through the chink of which the sun

kept throwing brilliant circles of light which hurt the eye to look at them, there would be standing a screen, with flies quietly parading the whiteness of its covering. Behind it would be seated Mimi, shaking her head in an irritable manner, and constantly shifting from spot to spot to avoid the sunshine as at intervals it darted her from somewhere and laid a streak of flame upon her hand or face. Through the other three windows the sun would be throwing three squares of light, crossed with the shadows of the window-frames, and where one of these patches marked the unstained floor of the room there would be lying, in accordance with invariable custom, Milka, with her ears pricked as she watched the flies promenading the lighted space. Seated on a settee, Katenka would be knitting or reading aloud as from time to time she gave her white sleeves (looking almost transparent in the sunshine) an impatient shake, or tossed her head with a frown to drive away some fly which had settled upon her thick auburn hair and was now buzzing in its tangles. Lubotshka would either be walking up and down the room (her hands clasped behind her) until the moment should arrive when a movement would be made towards the garden, or playing some piece of which every note had long been familiar to me. For my own part, I would sit down somewhere, and listen to the music or the reading until such time as I myself should have an opportunity of performing on the piano. After luncheon I would condescend to take the girls out riding (since to go for a mere walk at that hour seemed to me unsuitable to my years and position in the world), and these excursions of ours--in which I often took my companions through unaccustomed spots and dells--were very pleasant. Indeed, on some of these occasions I grew quite boyish, and the

girls would praise my riding and daring, and pretend that I was their protector. In the evening, if we had no guests with us, tea (served in the dim verandah), would be followed by a walk round the homestead with Papa, and then I would stretch myself on my usual settee, and read and ponder as of old, as I listened to Katenka or Lubotshka playing. At other times, if I was alone in the drawing-room and Lubotshka was performing some old-time air, I would find myself laying my book down, and gazing through the open doorway on to the balcony at the pendent, sinuous branches of the tall birch-trees where they stood overshadowed by the coming night, and at the clear sky where, if one looked at it intently enough, misty, yellowish spots would appear suddenly, and then disappear again. Next, as I listened to the sounds of the music wafted from the salon, and to the creaking of gates and the voices of the peasant women when the cattle returned to the village, I would suddenly bethink me of Natalia Savishna and of Mamma and of Karl Ivanitch, and become momentarily sad. But in those days my spirit was so full of life and hope that such reminiscences only touched me in passing, and soon fled away again.

After supper and (sometimes) a night stroll with some one in the garden (for I was afraid to walk down the dark avenues by myself), I would repair to my solitary sleeping-place on the verandah--a proceeding which, despite the countless mosquitos which always devoured me, afforded me the greatest pleasure. If the moon was full, I frequently spent whole nights sitting up on my mattress, looking at the light and shade, listening to the sounds or stillness, dreaming of one matter

and another (but more particularly of the poetic, voluptuous happiness which, in those days, I believed was to prove the acme of my felicity) and lamenting that until now it had only been given to me to IMAGINE things. No sooner had every one dispersed, and I had seen lights pass from the drawing-room to the upper chambers (whence female voices would presently be heard, and the noise of windows opening and shutting), than I would depart to the verandah, and walk up and down there as I listened attentively to the sounds from the slumbering mansion. To this day, whenever I feel any expectation (no matter how small and baseless) of realising a fraction of some happiness of which I may be dreaming, I somehow invariably fail to picture to myself what the imagined happiness is going to be like.

At the least sound of bare footsteps, or of a cough, or of a snore, or of the rattling of a window, or of the rustling of a dress, I would leap from my mattress, and stand furtively gazing and listening, thrown, without any visible cause, into extreme agitation. But the lights would disappear from the upper rooms, the sounds of footsteps and talking give place to snores, the watchman begin his nightly tapping with his stick, the garden grow brighter and more mysterious as the streaks of light vanished from the windows, the last candle pass from the pantry to the hall (throwing a glimmer into the dewy garden as it did so), and the stooping figure of Foka (decked in a nightcap, and carrying the candle) become visible to my eyes as he went to his bed. Often I would find a great and fearful pleasure in stealing over the grass, in the black shadow of the house, until I had reached the hall window, where I would

stand listening with bated breath to the snoring of the boy, to Foka's gruntings (in the belief that no one heard him), and to the sound of his senile voice as he drawled out the evening prayers. At length even his candle would be extinguished, and the window slammed down, so that I would find myself utterly alone; whereupon, glancing nervously from side to side, lest haply I should see the white woman standing near a flower-bed or by my couch, I would run at full speed back to the verandah. Then, and only then, I would lie down with my face to the garden, and, covering myself over, so far as possible, from the mosquitos and bats, fall to gazing in front of me as I listened to the sounds of the night and dreamed of love and happiness.

At such times everything would take on for me a different meaning. The look of the old birch trees, with the one side of their curling branches showing bright against the moonlit sky, and the other darkening the bushes and carriage-drive with their black shadows; the calm, rich glitter of the pond, ever swelling like a sound; the moonlit sparkle of the dewdrops on the flowers in front of the verandah; the graceful shadows of those flowers where they lay thrown upon the grey stonework; the cry of a quail on the far side of the pond; the voice of some one walking on the high road; the quiet, scarcely audible scrunching of two old birch trees against one another; the humming of a mosquito at my ear under the coverlet; the fall of an apple as it caught against a branch and rustled among the dry leaves; the leapings of frogs as they approached almost to the verandah-steps and sat with the moon shining mysteriously on their green backs--all these things took on for me a

strange significance--a significance of exceeding beauty and of infinite love. Before me would rise SHE, with long black tresses and a high bust, but always mournful in her fairness, with bare hands and voluptuous arms. She loved me, and for one moment of her love I would sacrifice my whole life!--But the moon would go on rising higher and higher, and shining brighter and brighter, in the heavens; the rich sparkle of the pond would swell like a sound, and become ever more and more brilliant, while the shadows would grow blacker and blacker, and the sheen of the moon more and more transparent: until, as I looked at and listened to all this, something would say to me that SHE with the bare hands and voluptuous arms did not represent ALL happiness, that love for her did not represent ALL good; so that, the more I gazed at the full, high-riding moon, the higher would true beauty and goodness appear to me to lie, and the purer and purer they would seem--the nearer and nearer to Him who is the source of all beauty and all goodness. And tears of a sort of unsatisfied, yet tumultuous, joy would fill my eyes.

Always, too, I was alone; yet always, too, it seemed to me that, although great, mysterious Nature could draw the shining disc of the moon to herself, and somehow hold in some high, indefinite place the pale-blue sky, and be everywhere around me, and fill of herself the infinity of space, while I was but a lowly worm, already defiled with the poor, petty passions of humanity--always it seemed to me that, nevertheless, both Nature and the moon and I were one.