

XXXIII. OUR NEIGHBOURS

ON the first day after our arrival, I had been greatly astonished that Papa should speak of our neighbours, the Epifanovs, as "nice people," and still more so that he should go to call upon them. The fact was that we had long been at law over some land with this family. When a child, I had more than once heard Papa raging over the litigation, abusing the Epifanovs, and warning people (so I understood him) against them. Likewise, I had heard Jakoff speak of them as "our enemies" and "black people" and could remember Mamma requesting that their names should never be mentioned in her presence, nor, indeed, in the house at all.

From these data I, as a child, had arrived at the clear and assured conviction that the Epifanovs were foemen of ours who would at any time stab or strangle both Papa and his sons if they should ever come across them, as well as that they were "black people", in the literal sense of the term. Consequently, when, in the year that Mamma died, I chanced to catch sight of Avdotia ("La Belle Flamande") on the occasion of a visit which she paid to my mother, I found it hard to believe that she did not come of a family of negroes. All the same, I had the lowest possible opinion of the family, and, for all that we saw much of them that summer, continued to be strongly prejudiced against them. As a matter of fact, their household only consisted of the mother (a widow of fifty, but a very well-preserved, cheery old woman), a beautiful daughter named Avdotia, and a son, Peter, who was a stammerer, unmarried, and of very serious disposition.

For the last twenty years before her husband's death, Madame Epifanov had lived apart from him--sometimes in St. Petersburg, where she had relatives, but more frequently at her village of Mitishtchi, which stood some three versts from ours. Yet the neighbourhood had taken to circulating such horrible tales concerning her mode of life that Messalina was, by comparison, a blameless child: which was why my mother had requested her name never to be mentioned. As a matter of fact, not one-tenth part of the most cruel of all gossip--the gossip of country-houses--is worthy of credence; and although, when I first made Madame's acquaintance, she had living with her in the house a clerk named Mitusha, who had been promoted from a serf, and who, curled, pomaded, and dressed in a frockcoat of Circassian pattern, always stood behind his mistress's chair at luncheon, while from time to time she invited her guests to admire his handsome eyes and mouth, there was nothing for gossip to take hold of. I believe, too, that since the time--ten years earlier--when she had recalled her dutiful son Peter from the service, she had wholly changed her mode of living. It seems her property had never been a large one--merely a hundred souls or so--[This refers, of course, to the days of serfdom.]and that during her previous life of gaiety she had spent a great deal. Consequently, when, some ten years ago, those portions of the property which had been mortgaged and re-mortgaged had been foreclosed upon and compulsorily sold by auction, she had come to the conclusion that all these unpleasant details of distress upon and valuation of her property had been due not so much to failure to pay the interest as to the fact that

she was a woman: wherefore she had written to her son (then serving with his regiment) to come and save his mother from her embarrassments, and he, like a dutiful son--conceiving that his first duty was to comfort his mother in her old age--had straightway resigned his commission (for all that he had been doing well in his profession, and was hoping soon to become independent), and had come to join her in the country.

Despite his plain face, uncouth demeanour, and fault of stuttering, Peter was a man of unswerving principles and of the most extraordinary good sense. Somehow--by small borrowings, sundry strokes of business, petitions for grace, and promises to repay--he contrived to carry on the property, and, making himself overseer, donned his father's greatcoat (still preserved in a drawer), dispensed with horses and carriages, discouraged guests from calling at Mitishtchi, fashioned his own sleighs, increased his arable land and curtailed that of the serfs, felled his own timber, sold his produce in person, and saw to matters generally. Indeed, he swore, and kept his oath, that, until all outstanding debts were paid, he would never wear any clothes than his father's greatcoat and a corduroy jacket which he had made for himself, nor yet ride in aught but a country waggon, drawn by peasants' horses. This stoical mode of life he sought to apply also to his family, so far as the sympathetic respect which he conceived to be his mother's due would allow of; so that, although, in the drawing-room, he would show her only stuttering servility, and fulfil all her wishes, and blame any one who did not do precisely as she bid them, in his study or his office he would overhaul the cook if she had served up so much as a

duck without his orders, or any one responsible for sending a serf (even though at Madame's own bidding) to inquire after a neighbour's health or for despatching the peasant girls into the wood to gather wild raspberries instead of setting them to weed the kitchen-garden.

Within four years every debt had been repaid, and Peter had gone to Moscow and returned thence in a new jacket and tarantass. [A two-wheeled carriage.] Yet, despite this flourishing position of affairs, he still preserved the stoical tendencies in which, to tell the truth, he took a certain vague pride before his family and strangers, since he would frequently say with a stutter: "Any one who REALLY wishes to see me will be glad to see me even in my dressing-gown, and to eat nothing but shtchi [Cabbage-soup.] and kasha [Buckwheat gruel.] at my table." "That is what I eat myself," he would add. In his every word and movement spoke pride based upon a consciousness of having sacrificed himself for his mother and redeemed the property, as well as contempt for any one who had not done something of the same kind.

The mother and daughter were altogether different characters from Peter, as well as altogether different from one another. The former was one of the most agreeable, uniformly good-tempered, and cheerful women whom one could possibly meet. Anything attractive and genuinely happy delighted her. Even the faculty of being pleased with the sight of young people enjoying themselves (it is only in the best-natured of elderly folk that one meets with that TRAIT) she possessed to the full. On the other hand, her daughter was of a grave turn of mind. Rather, she was of that

peculiarly careless, absent-minded, gratuitously distant bearing which commonly distinguishes unmarried beauties. Whenever she tried to be gay, her gaiety somehow seemed to be unnatural to her, so that she always appeared to be laughing either at herself or at the persons to whom she was speaking or at the world in general--a thing which, possibly, she had no real intention of doing. Often I asked myself in astonishment what she could mean when she said something like, "Yes, I know how terribly good-looking I am," or, "Of course every one is in love with me," and so forth. Her mother was a person always busy, since she had a passion for housekeeping, gardening, flowers, canaries, and pretty trinkets. Her rooms and garden, it is true, were small and poorly fitted-up, yet everything in them was so neat and methodical, and bore such a general air of that gentle gaiety which one hears expressed in a waltz or polka, that the word "toy" by which guests often expressed their praise of it all exactly suited her surroundings. She herself was a "toy"--being petite, slender, fresh-coloured, small, and pretty-handed, and invariably gay and well-dressed. The only fault in her was that a slight over-prominence of the dark-blue veins on her little hands rather marred the general effect of her appearance. On the other hand, her daughter scarcely ever did anything at all. Not only had she no love for trifling with flowers and trinkets, but she neglected her personal exterior, and only troubled to dress herself well when guests happened to call. Yet, on returning to the room in society costume, she always looked extremely handsome--save for that cold, uniform expression of eyes and smile which is common to all beauties. In fact, her strictly regular, beautiful face and symmetrical figure always

seemed to be saying to you, "Yes, you may look at me."

At the same time, for all the mother's liveliness of disposition and the daughter's air of indifference and abstraction, something told one that the former was incapable of feeling affection for anything that was not pretty and gay, but that Avdotia, on the contrary, was one of those natures which, once they love, are willing to sacrifice their whole life for the man they adore.