

XLII. OUR STEPMOTHER

Notwithstanding that Papa had not meant to return to Moscow before the New Year, he arrived in October, when there was still good riding to hounds to be had in the country. He alleged as his reason for changing his mind that his suit was shortly to come on before the Senate, but Mimi averred that Avdotia had found herself so ennuyee in the country, and had so often talked about Moscow and pretended to be unwell, that Papa had decided to accede to her wishes. "You see, she never really loved him--she and her love only kept buzzing about his ears because she wanted to marry a rich man," added Mimi with a pensive sigh which said: "To think what a certain other person could have done for him if only he had valued her!"

Yet that "certain other person" was unjust to Avdotia, seeing that the latter's affection for Papa--the passionate, devoted love of self-abandonment--revealed itself in her every look and word and movement. At the same time, that love in no way hindered her, not only from being averse to parting with her adored husband, but also from desiring to visit Madame Annette's and order there a lovely cap, a hat trimmed with a magnificent blue ostrich feather, and a blue Venetian velvet bodice which was to expose to the public gaze the snowy, well shaped breast and arms which no one had yet gazed upon except her husband and maids. Of course Katenka sided with her mother and, in general, there became established between Avdotia and ourselves, from the day of her arrival, the most extraordinary and burlesque order of

relations. As soon as she stepped from the carriage, Woloda assumed an air of great seriousness and ceremony, and, advancing towards her with much bowing and scraping, said in the tone of one who is presenting something for acceptance:

"I have the honour to greet the arrival of our dear Mamma, and to kiss her hand."

"Ah, my dear son!" she replied with her beautiful, unvarying smile.

"And do not forget the younger son," I said as I also approached her hand, with an involuntary imitation of Woloda's voice and expression.

Had our stepmother and ourselves been certain of any mutual affection, that expression might have signified contempt for any outward manifestation of our love. Had we been ill-disposed towards one another, it might have denoted irony, or contempt for pretence, or a desire to conceal from Papa (standing by the while) our real relations, as well as many other thoughts and sentiments. But, as a matter of fact, that expression (which well consorted with Avdotia's own spirit) simply signified nothing at all--simply concealed the absence of any definite relations between us. In later life I often had occasion to remark, in the case of other families whose members anticipated among themselves relations not altogether harmonious, the sort of provisional, burlesque relations which they formed for daily use; and it was just such relations as those which now became established between ourselves and

our stepmother. We scarcely ever strayed beyond them, but were polite to her, conversed with her in French, bowed and scraped before her, and called her "chere Maman"--a term to which she always responded in a tone of similar lightness and with her beautiful, unchanging smile. Only the lachrymose Lubotshka, with her goose feet and artless prattle, really liked our stepmother, or tried, in her naive and frequently awkward way, to bring her and ourselves together: wherefore the only person in the world for whom, besides Papa, Avdotia had a spark of affection was Lubotshka. Indeed, Avdotia always treated her with a kind of grave admiration and timid deference which greatly surprised me.

From the first Avdotia was very fond of calling herself our stepmother and hinting that, since children and servants usually adopt an unjust and hostile attitude towards a woman thus situated, her own position was likely to prove a difficult one. Yet, though she foresaw all the unpleasantness of her predicament, she did nothing to escape from it by (for instance) conciliating this one, giving presents to that other one, and forbearing to grumble--the last a precaution which it would have been easy for her to take, seeing that by nature she was in no way exacting, as well as very good-tempered. Yet, not only did she do none of these things, but her expectation of difficulties led her to adopt the defensive before she had been attacked. That is to say, supposing that the entire household was designing to show her every kind of insult and annoyance, she would see plots where no plots were, and consider that her most dignified course was to suffer in silence--an attitude of passivity as regards winning Affection which of course led to

DISaffection. Moreover, she was so totally lacking in that faculty of "apprehension" to which I have already referred as being highly developed in our household, and all her customs were so utterly opposed to those which had long been rooted in our establishment, that those two facts alone were bound to go against her. From the first, her mode of life in our tidy, methodical household was that of a person only just arrived there. Sometimes she went to bed late, sometimes early; sometimes she appeared at luncheon, sometimes she did not; sometimes she took supper, sometimes she dispensed with it. When we had no guests with us she more often than not walked about the house in a semi-nude condition, and was not ashamed to appear before us--even before the servants--in a white chemise, with only a shawl thrown over her bare shoulders. At first this Bohemianism pleased me, but before very long it led to my losing the last shred of respect which I felt for her. What struck me as even more strange was the fact that, according as we had or had not guests, she was two different women. The one (the woman figuring in society) was a young and healthy, but rather cold, beauty, a person richly dressed, neither stupid nor clever, and unfailingly cheerful. The other woman (the one in evidence when no guests were present) was considerably past her first youth, languid, depressed, slovenly, and ennuyee, though affectionate. Frequently, as I looked at her when, smiling, rosy with the winter air, and happy in the consciousness of her beauty, she came in from a round of calls and, taking off her hat, went to look at herself in a mirror; or when, rustling in her rich, decollete ball dress, and at once shy and proud before the servants, she was passing to her carriage; or when, at one of our small receptions at

home, she was sitting dressed in a high silken dress finished with some sort of fine lace about her soft neck, and flashing her unvarying, but lovely, smile around her--as I looked at her at such times I could not help wondering what would have been said by persons who had been ravished to behold her thus if they could have seen her as I often saw her, namely, when, waiting in the lonely midnight hours for her husband to return from his club, she would walk like a shadow from room to room, with her hair dishevelled and her form clad in a sort of dressing-jacket. Presently, she would sit down to the piano and, her brows all puckered with the effort, play over the only waltz that she knew; after which she would pick up a novel, read a few pages somewhere in the middle of it, and throw it aside. Next, repairing in person to the dining-room, so as not to disturb the servants, she would get herself a cucumber and some cold veal, and eat it standing by the window-sill--then once more resume her weary, aimless, gloomy wandering from room to room. But what, above all other things, caused estrangement between us was that lack of understanding which expressed itself chiefly in the peculiar air of indulgent attention with which she would listen when any one was speaking to her concerning matters of which she had no knowledge. It was not her fault that she acquired the unconscious habit of bending her head down and smiling slightly with her lips only when she found it necessary to converse on topics which did not interest her (which meant any topic except herself and her husband); yet that smile and that inclination of the head, when incessantly repeated, could become unbearably wearisome. Also, her peculiar gaiety--which always sounded as though she were laughing at herself, at you, and at the world

in general--was gauche and anything but infectious, while her sympathy was too evidently forced. Lastly, she knew no reticence with regard to her ceaseless rapturising to all and sundry concerning her love for Papa. Although she only spoke the truth when she said that her whole life was bound up with him, and although she proved it her life long, we considered such unrestrained, continual insistence upon her affection for him bad form, and felt more ashamed for her when she was descanting thus before strangers even than we did when she was perpetrating bad blunders in French. Yet, although, as I have said, she loved her husband more than anything else in the world, and he too had a great affection for her (or at all events he had at first, and when he saw that others besides himself admired her beauty), it seemed almost as though she purposely did everything most likely to displease him--simply to prove to him the strength of her love, her readiness to sacrifice herself for his sake, and the fact that her one aim in life was to win his affection! She was fond of display, and my father too liked to see her as a beauty who excited wonder and admiration; yet she sacrificed her weakness for fine clothes to her love for him, and grew more and more accustomed to remain at home in a plain grey blouse. Again, Papa considered freedom and equality to be indispensable conditions of family life, and hoped that his favourite Lubotshka and his kind-hearted young wife would become sincere friends; yet once again Avdotia sacrificed herself by considering it incumbent upon her to pay the "real mistress of the house," as she called Lubotshka, an amount of deference which only shocked and annoyed my father. Likewise, he played cards a great deal that winter, and lost considerable sums towards the end of it,

wherefore, unwilling, as usual, to let his gambling affairs intrude upon his family life, he began to preserve complete secrecy concerning his play; yet Avdotia, though often ailing, as well as, towards the end of the winter, enceinte, considered herself bound always to sit up (in a grey blouse, and with her hair dishevelled) for my father when, at, say, four or five o'clock in the morning, he returned home from the club ashamed, depleted in pocket, and weary. She would ask him absent-mindedly whether he had been fortunate in play, and listen with indulgent attention, little nods of her head, and a faint smile upon her face as he told her of his doings at the club and begged her, for about the hundredth time, never to sit up for him again. Yet, though Papa's winnings or losings (upon which his substance practically depended) in no way interested her, she was always the first to meet him when he returned home in the small hours of the morning. This she was incited to do, not only by the strength of her devotion, but by a certain secret jealousy from which she suffered. No one in the world could persuade her that it was REALLY from his club, and not from a mistress's, that Papa came home so late. She would try to read love secrets in his face, and, discerning none there, would sigh with a sort of enjoyment of her grief, and give herself up once more to the contemplation of her unhappiness.

As the result of these and many other constant sacrifices which occurred in Papa's relations with his wife during the latter months of that winter (a time when he lost much, and was therefore out of spirits), there gradually grew up between the two an intermittent feeling of tacit hostility--of restrained aversion to the object of devotion of the kind

which expresses itself in an unconscious eagerness to show the object in question every possible species of petty annoyance.