

Uncle's Dream, Fyodor Dostoevsky

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UNCLE'S DREAM.

CHAPTER I.

Maria Alexandrovna Moskaleva was the principal lady of Mordasoff—there was no doubt whatever on that point! She always bore herself as though she did not care a fig for anyone, but as though no one else could do without her. True, there were uncommonly few who loved her—in fact I may say that very many detested her; still, everyone was afraid of her, and that was what she liked!

Now, why did Maria Alexandrovna, who dearly loves scandal, and cannot sleep at night unless she has heard something new and piquant the day before,—why, or how did she know how to bear herself so that it would never strike anyone, looking at her, to suppose that the dignified lady was the most inveterate scandal-monger in the world—or at all events in Mordasoff? On the contrary, anyone would have said at once, that scandals and such-like pettiness must vanish in her presence; and that scandal-mongers, caught red-handed by Maria Alexandrovna, would blush and tremble, like schoolboys at the entrance of the master; and that the talk would immediately be diverted into channels of the loftiest and most sublime subjects so soon as she entered the room. Maria Alexandrovna knew many deadly and scandalous secrets of certain other Mordasoff inhabitants, which, if she liked to reveal them at any convenient opportunity, would produce results little less terrible than the earthquake of Lisbon. Still, she was very quiet about the secrets she knew, and never let them out except in cases of absolute need, and then only to her nearest and dearest friends. She liked to hint that she knew certain things, and frighten people out of their wits; preferring to keep them in a state of perpetual terror, rather than crush them altogether.

This was real talent—the talent of tactics.

We all considered Maria Alexandrovna as our type and model of irreproachable commel-faut! She had no rival in this respect in Mordasoff! She could kill and annihilate and pulverize any rival with a single word. We have seen her do it; and all the while she would look as though she had not even observed that she had let the fatal word fall.

Everyone knows that this trait is a speciality of the highest circles.

Her circle of friends was large. Many visitors to Mordasoff left the town again in an ecstasy over her reception of them, and carried on a correspondence with her afterwards! Somebody even addressed some poetry to her, which she showed about the place with great pride. The novelist who came to the town used to read his novel to her of an evening, and ended by dedicating it to her; which produced a very agreeable effect. A certain German professor, who came from Carlsbad to inquire into the question of a little worm with horns which abounds in our part of the world, and who wrote and published four large quarto volumes about this same little insect, was so delighted and ravished with her amiability and kindness that to this very day he carries on a most improving correspondence upon moral subjects from far Carlsbad!

Some people have compared Maria Alexandrovna, in certain respects, with Napoleon. Of course it may have been her enemies who did so, in order to bring Maria Alexandrovna to scorn; but all I can say is, How is it that Napoleon, when he rose to his highest, that too high estate of his, became giddy and fell? Historians of the old school have ascribed this to the fact that he was not only not of royal blood, but was not even a gentleman! and therefore when he rose too high, he thought of his proper place, the ground, became giddy and fell! But why did not Maria Alexandrovna's head whirl? And how was it that she could always keep her place as the first lady of Mordasoff?

People have often said this sort of thing of Maria Alexandrovna; for instance: "Oh—yes, but how would she act under such and such difficult circumstances?" Yet, when the circumstances arose, Maria Alexandrovna invariably rose also to the emergency! For instance, when her husband—Afanassy Matveyevitch—was obliged to throw up his appointment, out of pure incapacity and feebleness of intellect, just before the government inspector came down to look into matters, all Mordasoff danced with delight to think that she would be down on her knees to this inspector, begging and beseeching and weeping and praying—in fact, that she would drop her wings and fall; but, bless you, nothing of the sort happened! Maria Alexandrovna quite understood that her husband was beyond praying for: he must retire. So she only rearranged her affairs a little, in such a manner that she lost not a scrap of her influence in the place, and her house still remained the acknowledged head of all Mordasoff Society!

The procurer's wife, Anna Nicolaevna Antipova, the sworn foe of Maria Alexandrovna, though a friend so far as could be judged outside, had already blown the trumpet of victory over her rival! But when Society found that Maria Alexandrovna was extremely difficult to put down, they were obliged to conclude that the latter had struck her roots far deeper than they had thought for.

As I have mentioned Afanassy Matveyevitch, Maria Alexandrovna's husband, I may as well add a few words about him in this place.

Firstly, then, he was a most presentable man, so far as exterior goes, and a very high-principled person besides; but in critical moments he used to lose his head and stand looking like a sheep which has come across a new gate. He looked very majestic and dignified in his dress-coat and white tie at dinner parties, and so on; but his dignity only lasted until he opened his mouth to speak; for then—well, you'd better have shut your ears, ladies and gentlemen, when he began to talk—that's all! Everyone agreed that he was quite unworthy to be Maria Alexandrovna's husband. He only sat in his place by virtue of his wife's genius. In my humble opinion he ought long ago to have been derogated to the office of frightening sparrows in the kitchen garden. There, and only there, would he have been in his proper sphere, and doing some good to his fellow countrymen.

Therefore, I think Maria Alexandrovna did a very wise thing when she sent him away

to her village, about a couple of miles from town, where she possessed a property of some hundred and twenty souls—which, to tell the truth, was all she had to keep up the respectability and grandeur of her noble house upon!

Everybody knew that Afanassy was only kept because he had earned a salary and perquisites; so that when he ceased to earn the said salary and perquisites, it surprised no-one to learn that he was sent away—"returned empty" to the village, as useless and fit for nothing! In fact, everyone praised his wife for her soundness of judgment and decision of character!

Afanassy lived in clover at the village. I called on him there once and spent a very pleasant hour. He tied on his white ties, cleaned his boots himself (not because he had no-one to do it for him, but for the sake of art, for he loved to have them shine), went to the bath as often as he could, had tea four times a day, and was as contented as possible.

Do you remember, a year and a half ago, the dreadful stories that were afoot about Zenaïda, Maria Alexandrovna's and Afanassy's daughter? Zenaïda was undoubtedly a fine, handsome, well-educated girl; but she was now twenty-three years old, and not married yet. Among the reasons put forth for Zenaïda being still a maid, one of the strongest was those dark rumours about a strange attachment, a year and a half ago, with the schoolmaster of the place—rumours not hushed up even to this day. Yes, to this very day they tell of a love-letter, written by Zina, as she was called, and handed all about Mordasoff. But kindly tell me, who ever saw this letter? If it went from hand to hand what became of it? Everyone seems to have heard of it, but no one ever saw it! At all events, I have never met anyone who actually saw the letter with his own eyes. If you drop a hint to Maria Alexandrovna about it, she simply does not understand you.

Well, supposing that there was something, and that Zina did write such a letter; what dexterity and skill of Maria Alexandrovna, to have so ably nipped the bud of the scandal! I feel sure that Zina did write the letter; but Maria Alexandrovna has managed so well that there is not a trace, not a shred of evidence of the existence of it. Goodness knows how she must have worked and planned to save the reputation of this only daughter of hers; but she managed it somehow.

As for Zina not having married, there's nothing surprising in that. Why, what sort of a husband could be found for her in Mordasoff? Zina ought to marry a reigning prince, if anyone! Did you ever see such a beauty among beauties as Zina? I think not. Of course, she was very proud—too proud.

There was Mosgliakoff—some people said she was likely to end by marrying him; but I never thought so. Why, what was there in Mosgliakoff? True, he was young and good looking, and possessed an estate of a hundred and fifty souls, and was a Petersburg swell; but, in the first place, I don't think there was much inside his head. He was such a funny, new-idea sort of man. Besides, what is an estate of a hundred and fifty souls, according to present notions? Oh, no; that's a marriage that never could come off.

There, kind reader, all you have just read was written by me some five months ago, for my own amusement. I admit, I am rather partial to Maria Alexandrovna; and I wished to write some sort of laudatory account of that charming woman, and to mould it into the form of one of those playful "letters to a friend," purporting to have been written in the old golden days (which will never return—thank Heaven!) to one of the periodicals of the time, "The Northern Bee," or some such paper. But since I have no "friend," and since I am, besides, naturally of a timid disposition, and especially so as to my literary efforts, the essay remained on my writing-table, as a memorial of my early literary attempts and in memory of the peaceful occupation of a moment or two of leisure.

Well, five months have gone by, and lo! great things have happened at Mordasoff!

Prince K— drove into the town at an early hour one fine morning, and put up at Maria Alexandrovna's house! The prince only stayed three days, but his visit proved pregnant with the most fatal consequences. I will say more—the prince brought about what was, in a certain sense, a revolution in the town, an account of which revolution will, of course, comprise some of the most important events that have ever happened in Mordasoff; and I have determined at last, after many heart-sinkings and flutterings, and much doubt, to arrange the story into the orthodox literary form of a novel, and present it to the indulgent Public! My tale will include a narrative of the Rise and Greatness and Triumphant Fall of Maria Alexandrovna, and of all her House in Mordasoff, a theme both worthy of, and attractive to any writer!

Of course I must first explain why there should have been anything extraordinary in the fact that Prince K— came to Mordasoff, and put up at Maria Alexandrovna's mansion. And in order to do this, I must first be allowed to say a few words about this same Prince K—. This I shall now do. A short biography of the nobleman is absolutely necessary to the further working out of my story. So, reader, you must excuse me.

CHAPTER II.

I will begin, then, by stating that Prince K— was not so very, very old, although, to look at him, you would think he must fall to pieces every moment, so decayed, or rather, worn-out was he. At Mordasoff all sorts of strange things were told of him. Some declared that the old prince's wits had forsaken him. All agreed that it was passing strange that the owner of a magnificent property of four thousand souls, a man of rank, and one who could have, if he liked, a great influence, and play a great part in his country's affairs; that such a man should live all alone upon his estate, and make an absolute hermit of himself, as did Prince K—. Many who had known him a few years before insisted upon it that he was very far from loving solitude then, and was as unlike a hermit as anyone could possibly be.

However, here is all I have been able to learn authentically as to his antecedents, etc.:—

Some time or other, in his younger days—which must have been a mighty long while ago,—the prince made a most brilliant entry into life. He knocked about and enjoyed himself, and sang romantic songs, and wrote epigrams, and led a fast life generally, very often abroad, and was full of gifts and intellectual capacity.

Of course he very soon ran through his means, and when old age approached, he suddenly found himself almost penniless. Somebody recommended him to betake himself to his country seat, which was about to be sold by public auction. So off he went with that intention; but called in at Mordasoff, and stopped there six months. He liked this provincial life, and while in our town he spent every farthing he had left in the world, continuing his reckless life as of old, galivanting about, and forming intimacies with half the ladies of Mordasoff.

He was a kind-hearted, good sort of a man, but, of course, not without certain princely failings, which, however, were accounted here to be nothing but evidences of the highest breeding, and for this reason caused a good effect instead of aversion. The ladies, especially, were in a state of perpetual ecstasy over their dear guest. They cherished the fondest and tenderest recollections of him. There were also strange traditions and rumours about the prince. It was said that he spent more than half the day at his toilet table; and that he was, in fact, made up of all sorts of little bits. No one could say when or how he had managed to fall to

pieces so completely.

He wore a wig, whiskers, moustache, and even an "espagnole," all false to a hair, and of a lovely raven black; besides which he painted and rouged every day. It was even said that he managed to do away with his wrinkles by means of hidden springs—hidden somehow in his wig. It was said, further, that he wore stays, in consequence of the want of a rib which he had lost in Italy, through being caused to fly, involuntarily, out of a window during a certain love affair. He limped with his left foot, and it was whispered that the said foot was a cork one—a very scientific member, made for him in place of the real one which came to grief during another love affair, in Paris this time. But what will not people say? At all events, I know for a fact that his right eye was a glass one; beautifully made, I confess, but still—glass. His teeth were false too.

For whole days at a time he used to wash himself in all sorts of patent waters and scents and pomades.

However, no one could deny that even then he was beginning to indulge in senile drivel and chatter. It appeared his career was about over; he had seen his best days, everyone knew that he had not a copeck left in the world!

Then, suddenly and unexpectedly, an old relative of his—who had always lived in Paris, but from whom he never had had the slightest hope of inheritance—died, after having buried her legal heir exactly a month before! The prince, to his utter astonishment, turned out to be the next heir, and a beautiful property of four thousand serfs, just forty miles from Mordasoff, became his—absolutely and unquestionably!

He immediately started off to Petersburg, to see to his affairs. Before he departed, however, the ladies of our town gave him a magnificent subscription banquet. They tell how bewitching and delightful the prince was at this last dinner; how he punned and joked and told the most unusual stories; and how he promised to come to Donchanovo (his new property) very soon, and gave his word that on his arrival he would give endless balls and garden parties and picnics and fireworks and entertainments of all kinds, for his friends here.

For a whole year after his departure, the ladies of the place talked of nothing but these promised festivities; and awaited the arrival of the "dear old man" with the utmost impatience. At last the prince arrived; but to the disappointment and astonishment of everyone, he did not even call in at Mordasoff on the way; and on his arrival at Donchanovo he shut himself up there, as I have expressed it before, like a very hermit.

All sorts of fantastic rumours were bruited about, and from this time the prince's life and history became most secret, mysterious, and incomprehensible.

In the first place, it was declared that the prince had not been very successful in St. Petersburg; that many of his relations—future heirs and heirs presumptive, and so on, had wished to put the Prince under some kind of restraint, on the plea of "feebleness of intellect;" probably fearing that he would run through this property as he had done with the last! And more, some of them went so far as to suggest that he should be popped into a lunatic asylum; and he was only saved by the interference of one of the nearest of kin, who pointed out that the poor old prince was more than half dead already, and that the rest of him must inevitably soon die too; and that then the property would come down to them safely enough without the need of the lunatic asylum. I repeat, what will not people say? Especially at our place, Mordasoff! All this, it was said, had frightened the prince dreadfully; so that his nature seemed to change entirely, and he came down to live a hermit life at Donchanovo.

Some of our Mordasoff folk went over to welcome him on his arrival; but they were either not received at all or received in the strangest fashion. The prince did not recognise his old friends: many people explained that he did not wish to recognise them. Among other visitors to Donchanovo was the Governor.

On the return of the latter from his visit, he declared that the prince was undoubtedly a little "off his head." The Governor always made a face if anyone reminded him of this visit of his to Donchanovo. The ladies were dreadfully offended.

At last an important fact was revealed: namely, that there was with the prince, and apparently in authority over him, some unknown person of the name of Stepanida Matveyevna, who had come down with him from St. Petersburg; an elderly fat woman in a calico dress, who went about with the house-keys in her hand; and that the prince obeyed this woman like a little child, and did not dare take a step without her leave; that she washed him and dressed him and soothed and petted him just like a nurse with a baby; and lastly, that she kept all visitors away from him, even relations—who, little by little, had begun to pervade the place rather too frequently, for the purpose of seeing that all was right.

It was said that this person managed not only the prince, but his estate too: she turned off bailiffs and clerks, she encashed the rents, she looked after things in general—and did it well, too; so that the peasants blessed their fate under her rule.

As for the prince, it was rumoured that he spent his days now almost entirely at his toilet-table, trying on wigs and dress-coats, and that the rest of his time was spent playing cards and games with Stepanida Matveyevna, and riding on a quiet old English mare. On such occasions his nurse always accompanied him in a covered droshky, because the prince liked to ride out of bravado, but was most unsafe in his saddle.

He had been seen on foot too, in a long great coat and a straw hat with a wide brim; a pink silk lady's tie round his neck, and a basket on his arm for mushrooms and flowers and berries, and so on, which he collected. The nurse accompanied him, and a few yards behind walked a manservant, while a carriage was in attendance on the high road at the side. When any peasant happened to meet him, and with low bow, and hat in hand, said, "Good morning, your highness—our beloved Sun, and Father of us all," or some such Russian greeting, he would stick his eye-glass in his eye, nod his head and say, with great urbanity, and in French, "Bon jour, mon ami, bon jour!"

Lots of other rumours there were—in fact, our folks could not forget that the prince lived so near them.

What, then, must have been the general amazement when one fine day it was trumpeted abroad that the prince—their curious old hermit-prince, had arrived at Mordasoff, and put up at Maria Alexandrovna's house!

Agitation and bewilderment were the order of the day; everybody waited for explanations, and asked one another what could be the meaning of this mystery? Some proposed to go and see for themselves; all agreed that it was most extraordinary. The ladies wrote notes to each other, came and whispered to one another, and sent their maids and husbands to find out more.

What was particularly strange was, why had the prince put up at Maria Alexandrovna's, and not somewhere else? This fact annoyed everyone; but, most of all, Mrs. Antipova, who happened to be a distant relative of the prince.

However, in order to clear up all these mysteries and find an answer to all these questions, we must ourselves go and see Maria Alexandrovna. Will you follow me in, kind reader? It is only ten in the morning, certainly, as you point out; but I daresay she will receive such intimate friends, all the same. Oh, yes; she'll see us all right.

CHAPTER III.

It is ten o'clock in the morning, and we are at Maria Alexandrovna's, and in that room which the mistress calls her "salon" on great occasions; she has a boudoir besides.

In this salon the walls are prettily papered, and the floor is nicely painted; the furniture is mostly red; there is a fireplace, and on the mantelpiece a bronze clock with some figure—a Cupid—upon it, in dreadfully bad taste. There are large looking-glasses between the windows. Against the back wall there stands a magnificent grand piano—Zina's—for Zina is a musician. On a table in the middle of the room hisses a silver tea-urn, with a very pretty tea-set alongside of it.

There is a lady pouring out tea, a distant relative of the family, and living with Maria Alexandrovna in that capacity, one Nastasia Petrovna Ziablova. She is a widow of over thirty, a brunette with a fresh-looking face and lively black eyes, not at all bad looking.

She is of a very animated disposition, laughs a great deal, is fond of scandal, of course; and can manage her own little affairs very nicely. She has two children somewhere, being educated. She would much like to marry again. Her last husband was a military man.

Maria Alexandrovna herself is sitting at the fire in a very benign frame of mind; she is dressed in a pale-green dress, which becomes her very well; she is unspeakably delighted at the arrival of the Prince, who, at this moment, is sitting upstairs, at his toilet table. She is so happy, that she does not even attempt to conceal her joy. A young man is standing before her and relating something in an animated way; one can see in his eyes that he wishes to curry favour with his listener.

This young fellow is about twenty-five years old, and his manners are decidedly good, though he has a silly way of going into raptures, and has, besides, a good deal too much of the "funny man" about him. He is well dressed and his hair is light; he is not a bad-looking fellow. But we have already heard of this gentleman: he is Mr. Mosgliakoff. Maria Alexandrovna considers him rather a stupid sort of a man, but receives him very well. He is an aspirant for the hand of her daughter Zina, whom, according to his own account, he loves to distraction. In his conversation, he refers to Zina every other minute, and does his best to bring a smile to her lips by his witty remarks; but the girl is evidently very cool and indifferent with him. At this moment she is standing away at the side near the piano, turning over the leaves of some book.

This girl is one of those women who create a sensation amounting almost to amazement when they appear in society. She is lovely to an almost impossible extent, a brunette with splendid black eyes, a grand figure and divine bust. Her shoulders and arms are like an antique statue; her gait that of an empress. She is a little pale to-day; but her lips, with the gleam of her pearly teeth between them, are things to dream of, if you once get a sight of them. Her expression is severe and serious.

Mr. Mosgliakoff is evidently afraid of her intent gaze; at all events, he seems to

cower before her when she looks at him. She is very simply dressed, in a white muslin frock—the white suits her admirably. But then, everything suits her! On her finger is a hair ring: it does not look as though the hair was her mother's, from the colour. Mosgliakoff has never dared to ask her whose hair it is. This morning she seems to be in a peculiarly depressed humour; she appears to be very much preoccupied and silent: but her mother is quite ready to talk enough for both; albeit she glances continually at Zina, as though anxious for her, but timidly, too, as if afraid of her.

"I am so pleased, Pavel Alexandrovitch," she chirps to Mosgliakoff; "so happy, that I feel inclined to cry the news out of the window to every passer-by. Not to speak of the delightful surprise—to both Zina and myself—of seeing you a whole fortnight sooner than we expected you—that, of course, 'goes without saying'; but I am so, so pleased that you should have brought this dear prince with you. You don't know how I love that fascinating old man. No, no! You would never believe it. You young people don't understand this sort of rapture; you never would believe me, assure you as much as ever I pleased.

"Don't you remember, Zina, how much he was to me at that time—six years ago? Why, I was his guide, his sister, his mother! There was something delightfully ingenuous and ennobling in our intimacy—one might say pastoral; I don't know what to call it—it was delightful. That is why the poor dear prince thinks of my house, and only mine, with gratitude, now. Do you know, Pavel Alexandrovitch, perhaps you have saved him by thus bringing him to me? I have thought of him with quaking of heart all these six years—you'd hardly believe it,—and dreamed of him, too. They say that wretch of a woman has bewitched and ruined him; but you've got him out of the net at last. We must make the best of our opportunity now, and save him outright. Do tell me again, how did you manage it? Describe your meeting and all in detail; I only heard the chief point of the story just now, and I do so like details. So, he's still at his toilet table now, is he?"

"Yes. It was all just as I told you, Maria Alexandrovna!" begins Mosgliakoff readily—delighted to repeat his story ten times over, if required—"I had driven all night, and not slept a wink. You can imagine what a hurry I was in to arrive here," he adds, turning to Zina; "in a word, I swore at the driver, yelled for fresh horses, kicked up a row at every post station: my adventures would fill a volume. Well, exactly at six o'clock in the morning I arrived at the last station, Igishova. 'Horses, horses!' I shouted, 'let's have fresh horses quick; I'm not going to get out.' I frightened the post-station man's wife out of her wits; she had a small baby in her arms, and I have an idea that its mother's fright will affect said baby's supply of the needful. Well, the sunrise was splendid—fine frosty morning—lovely! but I hadn't time to look at anything. I got my horses—I had to deprive some other traveller of his pair; he was a professor, and we nearly fought a duel about it.

"They told me some prince had driven off a quarter of an hour ago. He had slept here, and was driving his own horses; but I didn't attend to anything. Well, just seven miles from town, at a turn of the road, I saw that some surprising event had happened. A huge travelling carriage was lying on its side; the coachman and two flunkeys stood outside it, apparently dazed, while from inside the carriage came heart-rending lamentations and cries. I thought I'd pass by and let them all be—; it was no affair of mine: but humanity insisted, and would not take a denial. (I think it is Heine says that humanity shoves its nose in everywhere!) So I stopped; and my driver and myself, with the other fellows, lifted the carriage on to its legs again, or perhaps I should say wheels, as it had no legs.

"I thought to myself, 'This is that very prince they mentioned!' So, I looked in. Good Heavens! it was our prince! Here was a meeting, if you like! I yelled at him, 'Prince—uncle!' Of course he hardly knew me at the first glance, but he very soon

recognised me. At least, I don't believe he knows who I am really, even now; I think he takes me for someone else, not a relation. I saw him last seven years ago, as a boy; I remember him, because he struck me so; but how was he to remember me? At all events, I told him my name, and he embraced me ecstatically; and all the while he himself was crying and trembling with fright. He really was crying, I'll take my oath he was! I saw it with my own eyes.

"Well, we talked a bit, and at last I persuaded him to get into my trap with me, and call in at Mordasoff, if only for one day, to rest and compose his feelings. He told me that Stepanida Matveyevna had had a letter from Moscow, saying that her father, or daughter, or both, with all her family, were dying; and that she had wavered for a long time, and at last determined to go away for ten days. The prince sat out one day, and then another, and then a third, measuring wigs, and powdering and pomading himself; then he grew sick of it, and determined to go and see an old friend, a priest called Misael, who lived at the Svetozersk Hermitage. Some of the household, being afraid of the great Stepanida's wrath, opposed the prince's proposed journey; but the latter insisted, and started last night after dinner. He slept at Igishova, and went off this morning again, at sunrise. Just at the turn going down to the Reverend Mr. Misael's, the carriage went over, and the prince was very nearly shot down the ravine."

"Then I step in and save the prince, and persuade him to come and pay a visit to our mutual friend, Maria Alexandrovna (of whom the prince told me that she is the most delightful and charming woman he has ever known). And so here we are, and the prince is now upstairs attending to his wigs and so on, with the help of his valet, whom he took along with him, and whom he always would and will take with him wherever he goes; because he would sooner die than appear before ladies without certain little secret touches which require the valet's hand. There you are, that's the whole story."

"Why, what a humourist he is, isn't he, Zina?" said the lady of the house. "How beautifully you told the story! Now, listen, Paul: one question; explain to me clearly how you are related to the prince; you call him uncle!"

"I really don't know, Maria Alexandrovna; seventh, cousin I think, or something of that sort. My aunt knows all about it; it was she who made me go down to see him at Donchanova, when I got kicked out by Stepanida! I simply call him 'uncle,' and he answers me; that's about all our relationship."

"Well, I repeat, it was Providence that made you bring him straight to my house as you did. I tremble to think of what might have happened to the poor dear prince if somebody else, and not I, had got hold of him! Why, they'd have torn him to pieces among them, and picked his bones! They'd have pounced on him as on a new-found mine; they might easily have robbed him; they are capable of it. You have no idea, Paul, of the depth of meanness and greediness to which the people of this place have fallen!"

"But, my dear good Maria Alexandrovna—as if he would ever think of bringing him anywhere but to yourself," said the widow, pouring out a cup of tea; "you don't suppose he would have taken the prince to Mrs. Antipova's, surely, do you?"

"Dear me, how very long he is coming out," said Maria Alexandrovna, impatiently rising from her chair; "it really is quite strange!"

"Strange! what, of uncle? Oh dear, no! he'll probably be another five hours or so putting himself together; besides, since he has no memory whatever, he has very likely quite forgotten that he has come to your house! Why, he's a most extraordinary man, Maria Alexandrovna."

"Oh don't, don't! Don't talk like that!"

"Why not, Maria Alexandrovna? He is a lump of composition, not a man at all! Remember, you haven't seen him for six years, and I saw him half an hour ago. He is half a corpse; he's only the memory of a man; they've forgotten to bury him! Why, his eye is made of glass, and his leg of cork, and he goes on wires; he even talks on wires!"

Maria Alexandrovna's face took a serious expression. "What nonsense you talk," she said; "and aren't you ashamed of yourself, you, a young man and a relation too—to talk like that of a most honourable old nobleman! not to mention his incomparable personal goodness and kindness" (her voice here trembled with emotion). "He is a relic, a chip, so to speak, of our old aristocracy. I know, my dear young friend, that all this flightiness on your part, proceeds from those 'new ideas' of which you are so fond of talking; but, goodness me, I've seen a good deal more of life than you have: I'm a mother; and though I see the greatness and nobleness, if you like, of these 'new ideas,' yet I can understand the practical side of things too! Now, this gentleman is an old man, and that is quite enough to render him ridiculous in your eyes. You, who talk of emancipating your serfs, and 'doing something for posterity,' indeed! I tell you what it is, it's your Shakespeare! You stuff yourself full of Shakespeare, who has long ago outlived his time, my dear Paul; and who, if he lived now, with all his wisdom, would never make head or tail of our way of life!"

"If there be any chivalry left in our modern society, it is only in the highest circles of the aristocracy. A prince is a prince either in a hovel or in a palace! You are more or less a representative of the highest circles; your extraction is aristocratic. I, too, am not altogether a stranger to the upper ten, and it's a bad fledgling that fouls its own nest! However, my dear Paul, you'll forget your Shakespeare yet, and you'll understand all this much better than I can explain it. I foresee it! Besides, I'm sure you are only joking; you did not mean what you said. Stay here, dear Paul, will you? I'm just going upstairs to make inquiries after the prince, he may want something." And Maria Alexandrovna left the room hurriedly.

"Maria Alexandrovna seems highly delighted that Mrs. Antipova, who thinks so much of herself, did not get hold of the prince!" remarked the widow; "Mrs. Antipova must be gnashing her teeth with annoyance just now! She's a relation, too, as I've been pointing out to Maria Alexandrovna."

Observing that no one answered her, and casting her eyes on Zina and Mosgliakoff, the widow suddenly recollected herself, and discreetly left the room, as though to fetch something. However, she rewarded herself for her discretion, by putting her ear to the keyhole, as soon as she had closed the door after her.

Pavel Alexandrovitch immediately turned to Zina. He was in a state of great agitation; his voice shook.

"Zenaida Afanassievna, are you angry with me?" he began, in a timid, beseechful tone.

"With you? Why?" asked Zina, blushing a little, and raising her magnificent eyes to his face.

"For coming earlier. I couldn't help it; I couldn't wait another fortnight; I dreamed of you every night; so I flew off to learn my fate. But you are frowning, you are angry;—oh; am I really not to hear anything definite, even now?"

Zina distinctly and decidedly frowned.

"I supposed you would speak of this," she said, with her eyes drooped again, but with a firm and severe voice, in which some annoyance was perceptible; "and as the expectation of it was very tedious, the sooner you had your say, the better! You insist upon an answer again, do you? Very well, I say wait, just as I said it before. I now repeat, as I did then, that I have not as yet decided, and cannot therefore promise to be your wife. You cannot force a girl to such a decision, Pavel Alexandrovitch! However, to relieve your mind, I will add, that I do not as yet refuse you absolutely; and pray observe that I give you thus much hope of a favourable reply, merely out of forced deference to your impatience and agitation; and that if I think fit afterwards to reject you altogether, you are not to blame me for having given you false hopes. So now you know."

"Oh, but—but—what's the use of that? What hope am I to get out of that, Zina?" cried Mosgliakoff in piteous tones.

"Recollect what I have said, and draw whatever you please from the words; that's your business. I shall add nothing. I do not refuse you; I merely say—wait! And I repeat, I reserve the free right of rejecting you afterwards if I choose so to do. Just one more word: if you come here before the fixed time relying on outside protection, or even on my mother's influence to help you gain your end, let me tell you, you make a great mistake; if you worry me now, I shall refuse you outright. I hope we understand each other now, and that I shall hear no more of this, until the period I named to you for my decision." All this was said quietly and drily, and without a pause, as if learnt by rote. Paul felt foolish; but just at this moment Maria Alexandrovna entered the room, and the widow after her.

"I think he's just coming, Zina! Nastasia Petrovna, make some new tea quick, please!" The good lady was considerably agitated.

"Mrs. Antipova has sent her maid over to inquire about the prince already. How angry she must be feeling just now," remarked the widow, as she commenced to pass over the tea-urn.

"And what's that to me!" replied Maria Alexandrovna, over her shoulder. "Just as though I care what she thinks! I shall not send a maid to her kitchen to inquire, I assure you! And I am surprised, downright surprised, that, not only you, but all the town, too, should suppose that that wretched woman is my enemy! I appeal to you, Paul—you know us both. Why should I be her enemy, now? Is it a question of precedence? Pooh! I don't care about precedence! She may be first, if she likes, and I shall be readiest of all to go and congratulate her on the fact. Besides, it's all nonsense! Why, I take her part; I must take her part. People malign her; why do you all fall upon her so? Because she's young, and likes to be smart; is that it? Dear me, I think finery is a good bit better than some other failings—like Natalia Dimitrievna's, for instance, who has a taste for things that cannot be mentioned in polite society. Or is it that Mrs. Antipova goes out too much, and never stays at home? My goodness! why, the woman has never had any education; naturally she doesn't care to sit down to read, or anything of that sort. True, she coquets and makes eyes at everybody who looks at her. But why do people tell her that she's pretty? especially as she only has a pale face, and nothing else to boast of.

"She is amusing at a dance, I admit; but why do people tell her that she dances the polka so well? She wears hideous hats and things; but it's not her fault that nature gave her no gift of good taste. She talks scandal; but that's the custom of the place—who doesn't here? That fellow, Sushikoff, with his whiskers, goes to see her pretty often while her husband plays cards, but that may be merely a trumped-up tale; at all events I always say so, and take her part in every way! But, good heavens! here's the prince at last! 'Tis he, 'tis he! I recognise him! I should

know him out of a thousand! At last I see you! At last, my Prince!" cried Maria Alexandrovna,—and she rushed to greet the prince as he entered the room.

CHAPTER IV.

At first sight you would not take this prince for an old man at all, and it is only when you come near and take a good look at him, that you see he is merely a dead man working on wires. All the resources of science are brought to bear upon this mummy, in order to give it the appearance of life and youth. A marvellous wig, glorious whiskers, moustache and napoleon—all of the most raven black—cover half his face. He is painted and powdered with very great skill, so much so that one can hardly detect any wrinkles. What has become of them, goodness only knows.

He is dressed in the pink of fashion, just as though he had walked straight out of a tailor's fashion-page. His coat, his gloves, tie, his waistcoat, his linen, are all in perfect taste, and in the very last mode. The prince limps slightly, but so slightly that one would suppose he did it on purpose because that was in fashion too. In his eye he wears a glass—in the eye which is itself glass already.

He was soaked with scent. His speech and manner of pronouncing certain syllables was full of affectation; and this was, perhaps, all that he retained of the mannerisms and tricks of his younger days. For if the prince had not quite lost his wits as yet, he had certainly parted with nearly every vestige of his memory, which—alas!—is a thing which no amount of perfumeries and wigs and rouge and tight-lacing will renovate. He continually forgets words in the midst of conversation, and loses his way, which makes it a matter of some difficulty to carry on a conversation with him. However, Maria Alexandrovna has confidence in her inborn dexterity, and at sight of the prince she flies into a condition of unspeakable rapture.

"Oh! but you've not changed, you've not changed a bit!" she cries, seizing her guest by both hands, and popping him into a comfortable arm-chair. "Sit down, dear Prince, do sit down! Six years, prince, six whole long years since we saw each other, and not a letter, not a little tiny scrap of a note all the while. Oh, how naughty you have been, prince! And how angry I have been with you, my dear friend! But, tea! tea! Good Heavens, Nastasia Petrovna, tea for the prince, quick!"

"Th—thanks, thanks; I'm very s—orry!" stammered the old man (I forgot to mention that he stammered a little, but he did even this as though it were the fashion to do it). "Very s—sorry; fancy, I—I wanted to co—come last year, but they t—told me there was cho—cho—cholera here."

"There was foot and mouth disease here, uncle," put in Mosgliakoff, by way of distinguishing himself. Maria Alexandrovna gave him a severe look.

"Ye—yes, foot and mouth disease, or something of that s—sort," said the prince; "so I st—stayed at home. Well, and how's your h—husband, my dear Anna Nic—Nicolaevna? Still at his proc—procuror's work?"

"No, prince!" said Maria Alexandrovna, a little disconcerted. "My husband is not a procurer."

"I'll bet anything that uncle has mixed you up with Anna Nicolaevna Antipova," said Mosgliakoff, but stopped suddenly on observing the look on Maria Alexandrovna's face.

"Ye—yes, of course, Anna Nicolaevna. A—An. What the deuce! I'm always f—forgetting; Antipova, Antipova, of course," continued the prince.

"No, prince, you have made a great mistake," remarked Maria Alexandrovna, with a bitter smile. "I am not Anna Nicolaevna at all, and I confess I should never have believed that you would not recognise me. You have astonished me, prince. I am your old friend, Maria Alexandrovna Moskaloff. Don't you remember Maria Alexandrovna?"

"M—Maria Alexandrovna! think of that; and I thought she was w—what's her name. Y—yes, Anna Vasilievna! C'est délicieux. W—why I thought you were going to take me to this A—Anna Matveyevna. Dear me! C'est ch—charmant! It often happens so w—with me. I get taken to the wrong house; but I'm v—very pleased, v—very pleased! So you're not Nastasia Va—silievna? How interesting."

"I'm Maria Alexandrovna, prince; Maria Alexandrovna! Oh! how naughty you are, Prince, to forget your best, best friend!"

"Ye—es! ye—yes! best friend; best friend, for—forgive me!" stammered the old man, staring at Zina.

"That's my daughter Zina. You are not acquainted yet, prince. She wasn't here when you were last in the town, in the year — you know."

"Oh, th—this is your d—daughter!" muttered the old man, staring hungrily at Zina through his glasses. "Dear me, dear me. Ch—charmante, ch—armante! But what a lo—ovely girl," he added, evidently impressed.

"Tea! prince," remarked Maria Alexandrovna, directing his attention to the page standing before him with the tray. The prince took a cup, and examined the boy, who had a nice fresh face of his own.

"Ah! this is your l—little boy? Wh—what a charming little b—boy! and does he behave nicely?"

"But, prince," interrupted Maria Alexandrovna, impatiently, "what is this dreadful occurrence I hear of? I confess I was nearly beside myself with terror when I heard of it. Were you not hurt at all? Do take care. One cannot make light of this sort of thing."

"Upset, upset; the c—coachman upset me!" cried the prince, with unwonted vivacity. "I thought it was the end of the world, and I was fri—frightened out of my wits. I didn't expect it; I didn't, indeed! and my co—oachman is to blame for it all. I trust you, my friend, to lo—ok into the matter well. I feel sure he was making an attempt on my life!"

"All right, all right, uncle," said Paul; "I'll see about it. But look here—forgive him, just this once, uncle; just this once, won't you?"

"N—not I! Not for anything! I'm sure he wants my life, he and Lavrenty too. It's— it's the 'new ideas;' it's Com—Communism, in the fullest sense of the word. I daren't meet them anywhere."

"You are right, you are quite right, prince," cried Maria Alexandrovna. "You don't know how I suffer myself from these wretched people. I've just been obliged to change two of my servants; and you've no idea how stupid they are, prince."

"Ye—yes! quite so!" said the prince, delighted—as all old men are whose senile chatter is listened to with servility. "But I like a fl—flunky to look stupid; it gives them presence. There's my Terenty, now. You remember Terenty, my friend? Well, the f—first time I ever looked at him I said, 'You shall be my ha—hall porter.' He's stupid, phen—phen—omenally stupid, he looks like a she—sheep; but his dig—dignity and majesty are wonderful. When I look at him he seems to be composing

some l-learned dis-sertation. He's just like the German philosopher, Kant, or like some fa-fat old turkey, and that's just what one wants in a serving-man."

Maria Alexandrovna laughed, and clapped her hands in the highest state of ecstasy; Paul supported her with all his might; Nastasia Petrovna laughed too; and even Zina smiled.

"But, prince, how clever, how witty, how humorous you are!" cried Maria Alexandrovna. "What a wonderful gift of remarking the smallest refinements of character. And for a man like you to eschew all society, and shut yourself up for five years! With such talents! Why, prince, you could write, you could be an author. You could emulate Von Vezin, Gribojedoff, Gogol!"

"Ye-yes! ye-yes!" said the delighted prince. "I can reproduce things I see, very well. And, do you know, I used to be a very wi-witty fellow indeed, some time ago. I even wrote a play once. There were some very smart couplets, I remember; but it was never acted."

"Oh! how nice it would be to read it over, especially just now, eh, Zina? for we are thinking of getting up a play, you must know, prince, for the benefit of the 'martyrs of the Fatherland,' the wounded soldiers. There, now, how handy your play would come in!"

"Certainly, certainly. I-I would even write you another. I think I've quite forgotten the old one. I remember there were two or three such epigrams that (here the prince kissed his own hand to convey an idea of the exquisite wit of his lines) I recollect when I was abroad I made a real furore. I remember Lord Byron well; we were great friends; you should have seen him dance the mazurka one day during the Vienna Congress."

"Lord Byron, uncle?-Surely not!"

"Ye-yes, Lord Byron. Perhaps it was not Lord Byron, though, perhaps it was someone else; no, it wasn't Lord Byron, it was some Pole; I remember now. A won-der-ful fellow that Pole was! He said he was a C-Count, and he turned out to be a c-cook-shop man! But he danced the mazurka won-der-fully, and broke his leg at last. I recollect I wrote some lines at the time:-

"Our little Pole
Danced like blazes."

-How did it go on, now? Wait a minute! No, I can't remember."

"I'll tell you, uncle. It must have been like this," said Paul, becoming more and more inspired:-

"But he tripped in a hole,
Which stopped his crazes."

"Ye-yes, that was it, I think, or something very like it. I don't know, though- perhaps it wasn't. Anyhow, the lines were very sm-art. I forget a good deal of what I have seen and done. I'm so b-busy now!"

"But do let me hear how you have employed your time in your solitude, dear prince," said Maria Alexandrovna. "I must confess that I have thought of you so often, and often, that I am burning with impatience to hear more about you and your doings."

"Employed my time? Oh, very busy; very busy, ge-generally. One rests, you see, part of the day; and then I imagine a good many things."

"I should think you have a very strong imagination, haven't you, uncle?" remarked

Paul.

"Exceptionally so, my dear fellow. I sometimes imagine things which amaze even myself! When I was at Kadueff,—by-the-by, you were vice-governor of Kadueff, weren't you?"

"I, uncle! Why, what are you thinking of?"

"No? Just fancy, my dear fellow! and I've been thinking all this time how f—funny that the vice-governor of Kadueff should be here with quite a different face: he had a fine intelligent, dig—dignified face, you know. A wo—wonderful fellow! Always writing verses, too; he was rather like the Ki—King of Diamonds from the side view, but—"

"No, prince," interrupted Maria Alexandrovna. "I assure you, you'll ruin yourself with the life you are leading! To make a hermit of oneself for five years, and see no one, and hear no one: you're a lost man, dear prince! Ask any one of those who love you, they'll all tell you the same; you're a lost man!"

"No," cried the prince, "really?"

"Yes, I assure you of it! I am speaking to you as a sister—as a friend! I am telling you this because you are very dear to me, and because the memory of the past is sacred to me. No, no! You must change your way of living; otherwise you will fall ill, and break up, and die!"

"Gracious heavens! Surely I shan't d—die so soon?" cried the old man. "You—you are right about being ill; I am ill now and then. I'll tell you all the sy—symptoms! I'll de—detail them to you. Firstly I—"

"Uncle, don't you think you had better tell us all about it another day?" Paul interrupted hurriedly. "I think we had better be starting just now, don't you?"

"Yes—yes, perhaps, perhaps. But remind me to tell you another time; it's a most interesting case, I assure you!"

"But listen, my dear prince!" Maria Alexandrovna resumed, "why don't you try being doctored abroad?"

"Ab—road? Yes, yes—I shall certainly go abroad. I remember when I was abroad, about '20; it was delightfully g—gay and jolly. I very nearly married a vi—viscountess, a French woman. I was fearfully in love, but som—somebody else married her, not I. It was a very s—strange thing. I had only gone away for a coup—couple of hours, and this Ger—German baron fellow came and carried her off! He went into a ma—madhouse afterwards!"

"Yes, dear prince, you must look after your health. There are such good doctors abroad; and—besides, the mere change of life, what will not that alone do for you! You must desert your dear Donchanovo, if only for a time!"

"C—certainly, certainly! I've long meant to do it. I'm going to try hy—hydropathy!"

"Hydropathy?"

"Yes. I've tried it once before: I was abroad, you know, and they persuaded me to try drinking the wa—waters. There wasn't anything the matter with me, but I agreed, just out of deli—delicacy for their feelings; and I did seem to feel easier, somehow. So I drank, and drank, and dra—ank up a whole waterfall; and I assure you if I hadn't fallen ill just then I should have been quite well, th—thanks to the

water! But, I confess, you've frightened me so about these ma-maladies and things, I feel quite put out. I'll come back d-directly!"

"Why, prince, where are you off to?" asked Maria Alexandrovna in surprise.

"Directly, directly. I'm just going to note down an i-idea!"

"What sort of idea?" cried Paul, bursting with laughter.

Maria Alexandrovna lost all patience.

"I cannot understand what you find to laugh at!" she cried, as the old man disappeared; "to laugh at an honourable old man, and turn every word of his into ridicule-presuming on his angelic good nature. I assure you I blushed for you, Paul Alexandrovitch! Why, what do you see in him to laugh at? I never saw anything funny about him!"

"Well, I laugh because he does not recognise people, and talks such nonsense!"

"That's simply the result of his sad life, of his dreadful five years' captivity, under the guardianship of that she-devil! You should pity, not laugh at him! He did not even know me; you saw it yourself. I tell you it's a crying shame; he must be saved, at all costs! I recommend him to go abroad so that he may get out of the clutches of that-beast of a woman!"

"Do you know what-we must find him a wife!" cried Paul.

"Oh, Mr. Mosgliakoff, you are too bad; you really are too bad!"

"No, no, Maria Alexandrovna; I assure you, this time I'm speaking in all seriousness. Why not marry him off? Isn't it rather a brilliant idea? What harm can marriage do him? On the contrary, he is in that position that such a step alone can save him! In the first place, he will get rid of that fox of a woman; and, secondly, he may find some girl, or better still some widow-kind, good, wise and gentle, and poor, who will look after him as his own daughter would, and who will be sensible of the honour he does her in making her his wife! And what could be better for the old fellow than to have such a person about him, rather than the-woman he has now? Of course she must be nice-looking, for uncle appreciates good looks; didn't you observe how he stared at Miss Zina?"

"But how will you find him such a bride?" asked Nastasia Petrovna, who had listened intently to Paul's suggestion.

"What a question! Why, you yourself, if you pleased! and why not, pray? In the first place, you are good-looking, you are a widow, you are generous, you are poor (at least I don't think you are very rich). Then you are a very reasonable woman: you'll learn to love him, and take good care of him; you'll send that other woman to the deuce, and take your husband abroad, where you will feed him on pudding and lollipops till the moment of his quitting this wicked world, which will be in about a year, or in a couple of months perhaps. After that, you emerge a princess, a rich widow, and, as a prize for your goodness to the old gentleman, you'll marry a fine young marquis, or a governor-general, or somebody of the sort! There-that's a pretty enough prospect, isn't it?"

"Tfu! Goodness me! I should fall in love with him at once, out of pure gratitude, if he only proposed to me!" said the widow, with her black eyes all ablaze; "but, of course, it's all nonsense!"

"Nonsense, is it? Shall I make it sound sense, then, for you? Ask me prettily, and

if I don't make you his betrothed by this evening, you may cut my little finger off! Why, there's nothing in the world easier than to talk uncle into anything you please! He'll only say, 'Ye—yes, ye—yes,' just as you heard him now! We'll marry him so that he doesn't know anything about it, if you like? We'll deceive him and marry him, if you please! Any way you like, it can be done! Why, it's for his own good; it's out of pity for himself! Don't you think, seriously, Nastasia Petrovna, that you had better put on some smart clothes in any case?"

Paul's enthusiasm amounted by now to something like madness, while the widow's mouth watered at his idea, in spite of her better judgment.

"I know, I know I look horridly untidy!" she said. "I go about anyhow, nowadays! There's nothing to dress for. Do I really look like a regular cook?"

All this time Maria Alexandrovna sat still, with a strange expression on her face. I shall not be far wrong if I say that she listened to Paul's wild suggestion with a look of terror, almost: she was confused and startled; at last she recollected herself, and spoke.

"All this is very nice, of course; but at the same time it is utter nonsense, and perfectly out of the question!" she observed cuttingly.

"Why, why, my good Maria Alexandrovna? Why is it such nonsense, or why out of the question?"

"For many reasons; and, principally because you are, as the prince is also, a guest in my house; and I cannot permit anyone to forget their respect towards my establishment! I shall consider your words as a joke, Paul Alexandrovitch, and nothing more! Here comes the prince—thank goodness!"

"Here I am!" cried the old man as he entered. "It's a wo—wonderful thing how many good ideas of all s—sorts I'm having to-day! and another day I may spend the whole of it without a single one! As—tonishing? not one all day!"

"Probably the result of your accident, to-day, uncle! Your nerves got shaken up, you see, and —"

"Ye—yes, I think so, I think so too; and I look on the accident as pro—fitable, on the whole; and therefore I'm going to excuse the coachman. I don't think it was an at—tempt on my life, after all, do you? Besides, he was punished a little while ago, when his beard was sh—shaved off!"

"Beard shaved off? Why, uncle, his beard is as big as a German state!"

"Ye—yes, a German state, you are very happy in your ex—pressions, my boy! but it's a fa—false one. Fancy what happened: I sent for a price-current for false hair and beards, and found advertisements for splendid ser—vants' and coachmen's beards, very cheap—extraordinarily so! I sent for one, and it certainly was a be—auty. But when we wanted to clap it on the coachman, we found he had one of his own t—twice as big; so I thought, shall I cut off his, or let him wear it, and send this one b—back? and I decided to shave his off, and let him wear the f—false one!"

"On the theory that art is higher than nature, I suppose uncle?"

"Yes, yes! Just so—and I assure you, when we cut off his beard he suffered as much as though we were depriving him of all he held most dear! But we must be go—going, my boy!"

"But I hope, dear prince, that you will only call upon the governor!" cried Maria

Alexandrovna, in great agitation. "You are mine now, Prince; you belong to my family for the whole of this day! Of course I will say nothing about the society of this place. Perhaps you are thinking of paying Anna Nicolaevna a visit? I will not say a word to dissuade you; but at the same time I am quite convinced that—time will show! Remember one thing, dear Prince, that I am your sister, your nurse, your guardian for to-day at least, and oh!—I tremble for you. You don't know these people, Prince, as I do! You don't know them fully: but time will teach you all you do not know."

"Trust me, Maria Alexandrovna!" said Paul, "it shall all be exactly as I have promised you!"

"Oh—but you're such a weathercock! I can never trust you! I shall wait for you at dinner time, Prince; we dine early. How sorry I am that my husband happens to be in the country on such an occasion! How happy he would have been to see you! He esteems you so highly, Prince; he is so sincerely attached to you!"

"Your husband? dear me! So you have a h—husband, too!" observed the old man.

"Oh, prince, prince! how forgetful you are! Why, you have quite, quite forgotten the past! My husband, Afanassy Matveyevitch, surely you must remember him? He is in the country: but you have seen him thousands of times before! Don't you remember—Afanassy Matveyevitch!"

"Afanassy Matveyevitch. Dear me!—and in the co—country! how very charming! So you have a husband! dear me, I remember a vaudeville very like that, something about—
"The husband's here,
And his wife at Tvere."

Charming, charming—such a good rhyme too; and it's a most ri—diculous story! Charming, charming; the wife's away, you know, at Jaroslaf or Tv— or somewhere, and the husband is—is—Dear me! I'm afraid I've forgotten what we were talking about! Yes, yes—we must be going, my boy! Au revoir, madame; adieu, ma charmante demoiselle" he added, turning to Zina, and putting the ends of her fingers to his lips.

"Come back to dinner,—to dinner, prince! don't forget to come back here quick!" cried Maria Alexandrovna after them as they went out; "be back to dinner!"

CHAPTER V.

"Nastasia Petrovna, I think you had better go and see what is doing in the kitchen!" observed Maria Alexandrovna, as she returned from seeing the prince off. "I'm sure that rascal Nikitka will spoil the dinner! Probably he's drunk already!" The widow obeyed.

As the latter left the room, she glanced suspiciously at Maria Alexandrovna, and observed that the latter was in a high state of agitation. Therefore, instead of going to look after Nikitka, she went through the "Salon," along the passage to her own room, and through that to a dark box-room, where the old clothes of the establishment and such things were stored. There she approached the locked door on tiptoe; and stifling her breath, she bent to the keyhole, through which she peeped, and settled herself to listen intently. This door, which was always kept shut, was one of the three doors communicating with the room where Maria Alexandrovna and Zina were now left alone. Maria Alexandrovna always considered Nastasia an untrustworthy sort of woman, although extremely silly into the bargain. Of course she had suspected the widow—more than once—of eavesdropping; but it so happened that at the moment Madame Moskaleva was too agitated and excited to think of the usual precautions.

She was sitting in her arm-chair and gazing at Zina. Zina felt that her mother was looking at her, and was conscious of an unpleasant sensation at her heart.

"Zina!"

Zina slowly turned her head towards the speaker, and lifted her splendid dark eyes to hers.

"Zina, I wish to speak to you on a most important matter!"

Zina adopted an attentive air, and sat still with folded hands, waiting for light. In her face there was an expression of annoyance as well as irony, which she did her best to hide.

"I wish to ask you first, Zina, what you thought of that Mosgliakoff, to-day?"

"You have known my opinion of him for a long time!" replied Zina, surlily.

"Yes, yes, of course! but I think he is getting just a little too troublesome, with his continual bothering you--"

"Oh, but he says he is in love with me, in which case his importunity is pardonable!"

"Strange! You used not to be so ready to find his offences pardonable; you used to fly out at him if ever I mentioned his name!"

"Strange, too, that you always defended him, and were so very anxious that I should marry him!--and now you are the first to attack him!"

"Yes; I don't deny, Zina, that I did wish, then, to see you married to Mosgliakoff! It was painful to me to witness your continual grief, your sufferings, which I can well realize--whatever you may think to the contrary!--and which deprived me of my rest at night! I determined at last that there was but one great change of life that would ever save you from the sorrows of the past, and that change was matrimony! We are not rich; we cannot afford to go abroad. All the asses in the place prick their long ears, and wonder that you should be unmarried at twenty-three years old; and they must needs invent all sorts of stories to account for the fact! As if I would marry you to one of our wretched little town councillors, or to Ivan Ivanovitch, the family lawyer! There are no husbands for you in this place, Zina! Of course Paul Mosgliakoff is a silly sort of a fellow, but he is better than these people here: he is fairly born, at least, and he has 150 serfs and landed property, all of which is better than living by bribes and corruption, and goodness knows what jobbery besides, as these do! and that is why I allowed my eyes to rest on him. But I give you my solemn word, I never had any real sympathy for him! and if Providence has sent you someone better now, oh, my dear girl, how fortunate that you have not given your word to Mosgliakoff! You didn't tell him anything for certain to-day, did you, Zina?"

"What is the use of beating about the bush, when the whole thing lies in a couple of words?" said Zina, with some show of annoyance.

"Beating about the bush, Zina? Is that the way to speak to your mother? But what am I? You have long ceased to trust to your poor mother! You have long looked upon me as your enemy, and not as your mother at all!"

"Oh, come mother! you and I are beyond quarrelling about an expression! Surely we understand one another by now? It is about time we did, anyhow!"

"But you offend me, my child! you will not believe that I am ready to devote all, all I can give, in order to establish your destiny on a safe and happy footing!"

Zina looked angrily and sarcastically at her mother.

"Would not you like to marry me to this old prince, now, in order to establish my destiny on a safe and happy footing?"

"I have not said a word about it; but, as you mention the fact, I will say that if you were to marry the prince it would be a very happy thing for you, and—"

"Oh! Well, I consider the idea utter nonsense!" cried the girl passionately. "Nonsense, humbug! and what's more, I think you have a good deal too much poetical inspiration, mamma; you are a woman poet in the fullest sense of the term, and they call you by that name here! You are always full of projects; and the impracticability and absurdity of your ideas does not in the least discourage you. I felt, when the prince was sitting here, that you had that notion in your head. When Mosgliakoff was talking nonsense there about marrying the old man to somebody I read all your thoughts in your face. I am ready to bet any money that you are thinking of it now, and that you have come to me now about this very question! However, as your perpetual projects on my behalf are beginning to weary me to death, I must beg you not to say one word about it, not one word, mamma; do you hear me? not one word; and I beg you will remember what I say!" She was panting with rage.

"You are a child, Zina; a poor sorrow-worn, sick child!" said Maria Alexandrovna in tearful accents. "You speak to your poor mother disrespectfully; you wound me deeply, my dear; there is not another mother in the world who would have borne what I have to bear from you every day! But you are suffering, you are sick, you are sorrowful, and I am your mother, and, first of all, I am a Christian woman! I must bear it all, and forgive it. But one word, Zina: if I had really thought of the union you suggest, why would you consider it so impracticable and absurd? In my opinion, Mosgliakoff has never said a wiser thing than he did to-day, when he declared that marriage was what alone could save the prince,—not, of course, marriage with that slovenly slut, Nastasia; there he certainly did make a fool of himself!"

"Now look here, mamma; do you ask me this out of pure curiosity, or with design? Tell me the truth."

"All I ask is, why does it appear to you to be so absurd?"

"Good heavens, mother, you'll drive me wild! What a fate!" cried Zina, stamping her foot with impatience. "I'll tell you why, if you can't see for yourself. Not to mention all the other evident absurdities of the plan, to take advantage of the weakened wits of a poor old man, and deceive him and marry him—an old cripple, in order to get hold of his money,—and then every day and every hour to wish for his death, is, in my opinion, not only nonsense, but so mean, so mean, mamma, that I—I can't congratulate you on your brilliant idea; that's all I can say!"

There was silence for one minute.

"Zina, do you remember all that happened two years ago?" asked Maria Alexandrovna of a sudden.

Zina trembled.

"Mamma!" she said, severely, "you promised me solemnly never to mention that

again."

"And I ask you now, as solemnly, my dear child, to allow me to break that promise, just once! I have never broken it before. Zina! the time has come for a full and clear understanding between us! These two years of silence have been terrible. We cannot go on like this. I am ready to pray you, on my knees, to let me speak. Listen, Zina, your own mother who bore you beseeches you, on her knees! And I promise you faithfully, Zina, and solemnly, on the word of an unhappy but adoring mother, that never, under any circumstances, not even to save my life, will I ever mention the subject again. This shall be the last time, but it is absolutely necessary!"

Maria Alexandrovna counted upon the effect of her words, and with reason:

"Speak, then!" said Zina, growing whiter every moment.

"Thank you, Zina!—Two years ago there came to the house, to teach your little brother Mitya, since dead, a tutor—"

"Why do you begin so solemnly, mamma? Why all this eloquence, all these quite unnecessary details, which are painful to me, and only too well known to both of us?" cried Zina with a sort of irritated disgust.

"Because, my dear child, I, your mother, felt in some degree bound to justify myself before you; and also because I wish to present this whole question to you from an entirely new point of view, and not from that mistaken position which you are accustomed to take up with regard to it; and because, lastly, I think you will thus better understand the conclusion at which I shall arrive upon the whole question. Do not think, dear child, that I wish to trifle with your heart! No, Zina, you will find in me a real mother; and perhaps, with tears streaming from your eyes, you will ask and beseech at my feet—at the feet of the 'mean woman,' as you have just called me,—yes, and pray for that reconciliation which you have rejected so long! That's why I wish to recall all, Zina, all that has happened, from the very beginning; and without this I shall not speak at all!"

"Speak, then!" repeated Zina, cursing the necessity for her mother's eloquence from the very bottom of her heart.

"I continue then, Zina!—This tutor, a master of the parish school, almost a boy, makes upon you what is, to me, a totally inexplicable impression. I built too much upon my confidence in your good sense, or your noble pride, and principally upon the fact of his insignificance—(I must speak out!)—to allow myself to harbour the slightest suspicion of you! And then you suddenly come to me, one fine day, and state that you intend to marry the man! Zina, it was putting a knife to my heart! I gave a shriek and lost consciousness.

"But of course you remember all this. Of course I thought it my duty to use all my power over you, which power you called tyranny. Think for yourself—a boy, the son of a deacon, receiving a salary of twelve roubles a month—a writer of weak verses which are printed, out of pity, in the 'library of short readings.' A man, a boy, who could talk of nothing but that accursed Shakespeare,—this boy to be the husband of Zenaida Moskaloff! Forgive me, Zina, but the very thought of it all makes me wild!

"I rejected him, of course. But no power would stop you; your father only blinked his eyes, as usual, and could not even understand what I was telling him about. You continue your relations with this boy, even giving him rendezvous, and, worst of all, you allow yourself to correspond with him!

"Rumours now begin to flit about town: I am assailed with hints; they blow their trumpets of joy and triumph; and suddenly all my fears and anticipations are verified! You and he quarrel over something or other; he shows himself to be a boy (I can't call him a man!), who is utterly unworthy of you, and threatens to show your letters all over the town! On hearing this threat, you, beside yourself with irritation, boxed his ears. Yes, Zina, I am aware of even that fact! I know all, all! But to continue—the wretched boy shows one of your letters the very same day to that ne'er-do-well Zanshin, and within an hour Natalie Dimitrievna holds it in her hands—my deadly enemy! The same evening the miserable fellow attempts to put an end to himself, in remorse. In a word, there is a fearful scandal stirred up. That slut, Nastasia, comes panting to me with the dreadful news; she tells me that Natalie Dimitrievna has had your letter for a whole hour. In a couple of hours the whole town will learn of your foolishness! I bore it all. I did not fall down in a swoon; but oh, the blows, the blows you dealt to my heart, Zina! That shameless scum of the earth, Nastasia, says she will get the letter back for two hundred roubles! I myself run over, in thin shoes, too, through the snow to the Jew Baumstein, and pledge my diamond clasps—a keepsake of my dear mother's! In a couple of hours the letter is in my hands! Nastasia had stolen it; she had broken open a desk, and your honour was safe!

"But what a dreadful day you had sentenced me to live! I noticed some grey hairs among my raven locks for the first time, next morning! Zina, you have judged this boy's action yourself now! You can admit now, and perhaps smile a bitter smile over the admission, that it was beyond the limits of good sense to wish to entrust your fate to this youth.

"But since that fatal time you are wretched, my child, you are miserable! You cannot forget him, or rather not him—for he was never worthy of you,—but you cannot forget the phantom of your past joy! This wretched young fellow is now on the point of death—consumption, they say; and you, angel of goodness that you are! you do not wish to marry while he is alive, because you fear to harass him in his last days; because to this day he is miserable with jealousy, though I am convinced that he never loved you in the best and highest sense of the word! I know well that, hearing of Mosgliakoff's proposal to you, he has been in a flutter of jealousy, and has spied upon you and your actions ever since; and you—you have been merciful to him, my child. And oh! God knows how I have watered my pillow with tears for you!"

"Oh, mother, do drop all this sort of thing!" cried Zina, with inexpressible agony in her tone. "Surely we needn't hear all about your pillow!" she added, sharply. "Can't we get on without all this declamation and pirouetting?"

"You do not believe me, Zina! Oh! do not look so unfriendly at me, my child! My eyes have not been dry these two years. I have hidden my tears from you; but I am changed, Zina mine, much changed and in many ways! I have long known of your feelings, Zina, but I admit I have only lately realized the depth of your mental anguish. Can you blame me, my child, if I looked upon this attachment of yours as romanticism—called into being by that accursed Shakespeare, who shoves his nose in everywhere where he isn't wanted?

"What mother would blame me for my fears of that kind, for my measures, for the severity of my judgment? But now, understanding as I do, and realizing your two years' sufferings, I can estimate the depth of your real feelings. Believe me, I understand you far better than you understand yourself! I am convinced that you love not him—not this unnatural boy,—but your lost happiness, your broken hopes, your cracked idol!

"I have loved too—perhaps more deeply than yourself; I, too, have suffered, I, too, have lost my exalted ideals and seen them levelled with the earth; and therefore who can blame me now—and, above all, can you blame me now,—if I consider a marriage

with the prince to be the one saving, the one essential move left to you in your present position”?

Zina listened to this long declamation with surprise. She knew well that her mother never adopted this tone without good reason. However this last and unexpected conclusion fairly amazed her.

“You don't mean to say you seriously entertain the idea of marrying me to this prince?” she cried bewildered, and gazing at her mother almost with alarm; “that this is no mere idea, no project, no flighty inspiration, but your deliberate intention? I have guessed right, then? And pray, how is this marriage going to save me? and why is it essential to me in my present position? And—and what has all this to do with what you have been talking about?—I cannot understand you, mother,—not a bit!”

“And I can't understand, angel mine, how you cannot see the connection of it all!” cried Maria Alexandrovna, in her turn. “In the first place, you would pass into new society, into a new world. You would leave for ever this loathsome little town, so full of sad memories for you; where you meet neither friends nor kindness; where they have bullied and maligned you; where all these—these magpies hate you because you are good looking! You could go abroad this very spring, to Italy, Switzerland, Spain!—to Spain, Zina, where the Alhambra is, and where the Guadalquiver flows—no wretched little stream like this of ours!”

“But, one moment, mother; you talk as though I were married already, or at least as if the prince had made me an offer!”

“Oh, no—oh dear, no! don't bother yourself about that, my angel! I know what I'm talking about! Let me proceed. I've said my 'firstly;' now, then, for my 'secondly!' I understand, dear child, with what loathing you would give your hand to that Mosgliakoff!—”

“I know, without your telling me so, that I shall never be his wife!” cried Zina, angrily, and with flashing eyes.

“If only you knew, my angel, how I understand and enter into your loathing for him! It is dreadful to vow before the altar that you will love a man whom you cannot love—how dreadful to belong to one whom you cannot esteem! And he insists on your love—he only marries you for love. I can see it by the way he looks at you! Why deceive ourselves? I have suffered from the same thing for twenty-five years; your father ruined me—he, so to speak, sucked up my youth! You have seen my tears many a time!—”

“Father's away in the country, don't touch him, please!” said Zina.

“I know you always take his part! Oh, Zina, my very heart trembled within me when I thought to arrange your marriage with Mosgliakoff for financial reasons! I trembled for the consequences. But with the prince it is different, you need not deceive him; you cannot be expected to give him your love, not your love—oh, no! and he is not in a state to ask it of you!”

“Good heavens, what nonsense! I do assure you you are in error from the very first step—from the first and most important step! Understand, that I do not care to make a martyr of myself for some unknown reason! Know, also, that I shall not marry anyone at all; I shall remain a maid. You have bitten my head off for the last two years because I would not marry. Well, you must accept the fact, and make the best of it; that's all I can say, and so it shall be!”

“But Zina, darling—my Zina, don't be so cross before you have heard me out! What a

hot-headed little person you are, to be sure! Let me show you the matter from my point of view, and you'll agree with me—you really will! The prince will live a year—two at most; and surely it is better to be a young widow than a decayed old maid! Not to mention the fact that you will be a princess—free, rich, independent! I dare say you look with contempt upon all these calculations—founded upon his death; but I am a mother, and what mother will blame me for my foresight?

“And if you, my angel of kindness, are unwilling to marry, even now, out of tenderness for that wretched boy's feelings, oh, think, think how, by marrying this prince, you will rejoice his heart and soothe and comfort his soul! For if he has a single particle of commonsense, he must understand that jealousy of this old man were too absurd—too ridiculous! He will understand that you marry him—for money, for convenience; that stern necessity compels you to it!

“And lastly, he will understand that—that,—well I simply wish to say, that, upon the prince's death, you will be at liberty to marry whomsoever you please.”

“That's a truly simple arrangement! All I have to do is to marry this prince, rob him of his money, and then count upon his death in order to marry my lover! You are a clever arithmetician, mamma; you do your sums and get your totals nicely. You wish to seduce me by offering me this! Oh, I understand you, mamma—I understand you well! You cannot resist the expression of your noble sentiments and exalted ideas, even in the manufacture of a nasty business. Why can't you say simply and straightforwardly, ‘Zina, this is a dirty affair, but it will pay us, so please agree with me?’ at all events, that would be candid and frank on your part.”

“But, my dear child, why, why look at it from this point of view? Why look at it under the light of suspicion as deceit, and low cunning, and covetousness? You consider my calculations as meanness, as deceit; but, by all that is good and true, where is the meanness? Show me the deceit. Look at yourself in the glass: you are so beautiful, that a kingdom would be a fair price for you! And suddenly you, you, the possessor of this divine beauty, sacrifice yourself, in order to soothe the last years of an old man's life! You would be like a beautiful star, shedding your light over the evening of his days. You would be like the fresh green ivy, twining in and about his old age; not the stinging nettle that this wretched woman at his place is, fastening herself upon him, and thirstily sucking his blood! Surely his money, his rank are not worthy of being put in the scales beside you? Where is the meanness of it; where is the deceit of all this? You don't know what you are saying, Zina.”

“I suppose they are worthy of being weighed against me, if I am to marry a cripple for them! No, mother, however you look at it, it is deceit, and you can't get out of that!”

“On the contrary, my dear child, I can look at it from a high, almost from an exalted—nay, Christian—point of view. You, yourself, told me once, in a fit of temporary insanity of some sort, that you wished to be a sister of charity. You had suffered; you said your heart could love no more. If, then, you cannot love, turn your thoughts to the higher aspect of the case. This poor old man has also suffered—he is unhappy. I have known him, and felt the deepest sympathy towards him—akin to love,—for many a year. Be his friend, his daughter, be his plaything, even, if you like; but warm his old heart, and you are doing a good work—a virtuous, kind, noble work of love.

“He may be funny to look at; don't think of that. He's but half a man—pity him! You are a Christian girl—do whatever is right by him; and this will be medicine for your own heart-wounds; employment, action, all this will heal you too, and where is the deceit here? But you do not believe me. Perhaps you think that I am deceiving myself when I thus talk of duty and of action. You think that I, a woman of the

world, have no right to good feeling and the promptings of duty and virtue. Very well, do not trust me, if you like: insult me, do what you please to your poor mother; but you will have to admit that her words carry the stamp of good sense,—they are saving words! Imagine that someone else is talking to you, not I. Shut your eyes, and fancy that some invisible being is speaking. What is worrying you is the idea that all this is for money—a sort of sale or purchase. Very well, then refuse the money, if it is so loathsome to your eyes. Leave just as much as is absolutely necessary for yourself, and give the rest to the poor. Help him, if you like, the poor fellow who lies there a-dying!”

“He would never accept my help!” muttered Zina, as though to herself.

“He would not, but his mother would!” said Maria Alexandrovna. “She would take it, and keep her secret. You sold your ear-rings, a present from your aunt, half a year or so ago, and helped her; I know all about it! I know, too, that the woman washes linen in order to support her unfortunate son!”

“He will soon be where he requires no more help!”

“I know, I understand your hints.” Maria Alexandrovna sighed a real sigh. “They say he is in a consumption, and must die.

“But who says so?”

“I asked the doctor the other day, because, having a tender heart, Zina, I felt interested in the poor fellow. The doctor said that he was convinced the malady was not consumption; that it was dangerous, no doubt, but still not consumption, only some severe affection of the lungs. Ask him yourself! He certainly told me that under different conditions—change of climate and of his style of living,—the sick man might well recover. He said—and I have read it too, somewhere, that off Spain there is a wonderful island, called Malaga—I think it was Malaga; anyhow, the name was like some wine, where, not only ordinary sufferers from chest maladies, but even consumptive patients, recover entirely, solely by virtue of the climate, and that sick people go there on purpose to be cured.

“Oh, but Spain—the Alhambra alone—and the lemons, and the riding on mules. All this is enough in itself to impress a poetical nature. You think he would not accept your help, your money—for such a journey? Very well—deceit is permissible where it may save a man's life.

“Give him hope, too! Promise him your love; promise to marry him when you are a widow! Anything in the world can be said with care and tact! Your own mother would not counsel you to an ignoble deed, Zina. You will do as I say, to save this boy's life; and with this object, everything is permissible! You will revive his hope; he will himself begin to think of his health, and listen to what the doctor says to him. He will do his best to resuscitate his dead happiness; and if he gets well again, even if you never marry him, you will have saved him—raised him from the dead!

“I can look at him with some sympathy. I admit I can, now! Perhaps sorrow has changed him for the better; and I say frankly, if he should be worthy of you when you become a widow, marry him, by all means! You will be rich then, and independent. You can not only cure him, but, having done so, you can give him position in the world—a career! Your marriage to him will then be possible and pardonable, not, as now, an absolute impossibility!

“For what would become of both of you were you to be capable of such madness now? Universal contempt, beggary; smacking little boys, which is part of his duty; the reading of Shakespeare; perpetual, hopeless life in Mordasoff; and lastly his

certain death, which will undoubtedly take place before long unless he is taken away from here!

"While, if you resuscitate him—if you raise him from the dead, as it were, you raise him to a good, useful, and virtuous life! He may then enter public life—make himself rank, and a name! At the least, even if he must die, he will die happy, at peace with himself, in your arms—for he will be by then assured of your love and forgiveness of the past, and lying beneath the scent of myrtles and lemons, beneath the tropical sky of the South. Oh, Zina, all this is within your grasp, and all—all is gain. Yes, and all to be had by merely marrying this prince."

Maria Alexandrovna broke off, and for several minutes there was silence; not a word was said on either side: Zina was in a state of indescribable agitation. I say indescribable because I will not attempt to describe Zina's feelings: I cannot guess at them; but I think that Maria Alexandrovna had found the road to her heart.

Not knowing how her words had sped with her daughter, Maria Alexandrovna now began to work her busy brain to imagine and prepare herself for every possible humour that Zina might prove to be in; but at last she concluded that she had happened upon the right track after all. Her rude hand had touched the sorest place in Zina's heart, but her crude and absurd sentimental twaddle had not blinded her daughter. "However, that doesn't matter"—thought the mother. "All I care to do is to make her think; I wish my ideas to stick!" So she reflected, and she gained her end; the effect was made—the arrow reached the mark. Zina had listened hungrily as her mother spoke; her cheeks were burning, her breast heaved.

"Listen, mother," she said at last, with decision; though the sudden pallor of her face showed clearly what the decision had cost her. "Listen mother—" But at this moment a sudden noise in the entrance hall, and a shrill female voice, asking for Maria Alexandrovna, interrupted Zina, while her mother jumped up from her chair.

"Oh! the devil fly away with this magpie of a woman!" cried the latter furiously. "Why, I nearly drove her out by force only a fortnight ago!" she added, almost in despair. "I can't, I can't receive her now. Zina, this question is too important to be put off: she must have news for me or she never would have dared to come. I won't receive the old — Oh! how glad I am to see you, dear Sophia Petrovna. What lucky chance brought you to see me? What a charming surprise!" said Maria Alexandrovna, advancing to receive her guest.

Zina escaped out of the room.

CHAPTER VI.

Mrs. Colonel Tarpuchin, or Sophia Petrovna, was only morally like a magpie; she was more akin to the sparrow tribe, viewed physically. She was a little bit of a woman of fifty summers or so, with lively eyes, and yellow patches all over her face. On her little wizened body and spare limbs she wore a black silk dress, which was perpetually on the rustle: for this little woman could never sit still for an instant.

This was the most inveterate and bitterest scandal-monger in the town. She took her stand on the fact that she was a Colonel's wife, though she often fought with her husband, the Colonel, and scratched his face handsomely on such occasions.

Add to this, that it was her custom to drink four glasses of "vodki" at lunch, or earlier, and four more in the evening; and that she hated Mrs. Antipova to madness.

"I've just come in for a minute, mon ange," she panted; "it's no use sitting down—no time! I wanted to let you know what's going on, simply that the whole town has

gone mad over this prince. Our 'beauties,' you know what I mean! are all after him, fishing for him, pulling him about, giving him champagne—you would not believe it! would you now? How on earth you could ever have let him out of the house, I can't understand! Are you aware that he's at Natalia Dimitrievna's at this moment?"

"At Natalia Dimitrievna's?" cried Maria Alexandrovna jumping up. "Why, he was only going to see the Governor, and then call in for one moment at the Antipova's!"

"Oh, yes, just for one moment—of course! Well, catch him if you can, there! That's all I can say. He found the Governor 'out,' and went on to Mrs. Antipova's, where he has promised to dine. There Natalia caught him—she is never away from Mrs. Antipova nowadays,—and persuaded him to come away with her to lunch. So there's your prince! catch him if you can!"

"But how—Mosgliakoff's with him—he promised—"

"Mosgliakoff, indeed,—why, he's gone too! and they'll be playing at cards and clearing him out before he knows where he is! And the things Natalia is saying, too—out loud if you please! She's telling the prince to his face that you, you have got hold of him with certain views—vous comprenez?"

"She calmly tells him this to his face! Of course he doesn't understand a word of it, and simply sits there like a soaked cat, and says 'Ye—yes!' And would you believe it, she has trotted out her Sonia—a girl of fifteen, in a dress down to her knees—my word on it? Then she has sent for that little orphan—Masha; she's in a short dress too,—why, I swear it doesn't reach her knees. I looked at it carefully through my pince-nez! She's stuck red caps with some sort of feathers in them on their heads, and set them to dance some silly dance to the piano accompaniment for the prince's benefit! You know his little weakness as to our sex,—well, you can imagine him staring at them through his glass and saying, 'Charmant!—What figures!' Tfu! They've turned the place into a music hall! Call that a dance! I was at school at Madame Jarne's, I know, and there were plenty of princesses and countesses there with me, too; and I know I danced before senators and councillors, and earned their applause, too: but as for this dance—it's a low can-can, and nothing more! I simply burned with shame,—I couldn't stand it, and came out."

"How! have you been at Natalia Dimitrievna's? Why, you—!"

"What!—she offended me last week? is that what you you mean? Oh, but, my dear, I had to go and have a peep at the prince—else, when should I have seen him? As if I would have gone near her but for this wretched old prince. Imagine—chocolate handed round and me left out. I'll let her have it for that, some day! Well, good-bye, mon ange: I must hurry off to Akulina, and let her know all about it. You may say good-bye to the prince; he won't come near you again now! He has no memory left, you know, and Mrs. Antipova will simply carry him off bodily to her house. He'll think it's all right—They're all afraid of you, you know; they think that you want to get hold of him—you understand! Zina, you know!"

"Quelle horreur!"

"Oh, yes, I know! I tell you—the whole town is talking about it! Mrs. Antipova is going to make him stay to dinner—and then she'll just keep him! She's doing it to spite you, my angel. I had a look in at her back premises. Such arrangements, my dear. Knives clattering, people running about for champagne. I tell you what you must do—go and grab him as he comes out from Natalia Dimitrievna's to Antipova's to dinner. He promised you first, he's your guest. Tfu! don't you be laughed at by this brace of chattering magpies—good for nothing baggage, both of them. 'Procuror's lady,' indeed! Why, I'm a Colonel's wife. Tfu!—Mais adieu, mon ange. I have my own sledge at the door, or I'd go with you."

Having got rid of this walking newspaper, Maria Alexandrovna waited a moment, to free herself of a little of her super-abundant agitation. Mrs. Colonel's advice was good and practical. There was no use losing time,—none to lose, in fact. But the greatest difficulty of all was as yet unsettled.

Maria Alexandrovna flew to Zina's room.

Zina was walking up and down, pale, with hands folded and head bent on her bosom: there were tears in her eyes, but Resolve was there too, and sparkled in the glance which she threw on her mother as the latter entered the room. She hastily dried her tears, and a sarcastic smile played on her lips once more.

“Mamma,” she began, anticipating her mother's speech “you have already wasted much of your eloquence over me—too much! But you have not blinded me; I am not a child. To do the work of a sister of mercy, without the slightest call thereto,—to justify one's meanness—meanness proceeding in reality from the purest egotism, by attributing to it noble ends,—all this is a sort of Jesuitism which cannot deceive me. Listen! I repeat, all this could not deceive me, and I wish you to understand that!”

“But, dearest child!” began her mother, in some alarm.

“Be quiet, mamma; have patience, and hear me out. In spite of the full consciousness that all this is pure Jesuitism, and in spite of my full knowledge of the absolutely ignoble character of such an act, I accept your proposition in full,—you hear me—in full; and inform you hereby, that I am ready to marry the prince. More! I am ready to help you to the best of my power in your endeavours to lure the prince into making me an offer. Why do I do this? You need not know that; enough that I have consented. I have consented to the whole thing—to bringing him his boots, to serving him; I will dance for him, that my meanness may be in some sort atoned. I shall do all I possibly can so that he shall never regret that he married me! But in return for my consent I insist upon knowing how you intend to bring the matter about? Since you have spoken so warmly on the subject—I know you!—I am convinced you must have some definite plan of operation in your head. Be frank for once in your life; your candour is the essential condition upon which alone I give my consent. I shall not decide until you have told me what I require!”

Maria Alexandrovna was so surprised by the unexpected conclusion at which Zina arrived, that she stood before the latter some little while, dumb with amazement, and staring at her with all her eyes. Prepared to have to combat the stubborn romanticism of her daughter—whose obstinate nobility of character she always feared,—she had suddenly heard this same daughter consent to all that her mother had required of her.

Consequently, the matter had taken a very different complexion. Her eyes sparkled with delight:

“Zina, Zina!” she cried; “you are my life, my—”

She could say no more, but fell to embracing and kissing her daughter.

“Oh, mother, I don't want all this kissing!” cried Zina, with impatience and disgust. “I don't need all this rapture on your part; all I want is a plain answer to my question!”

“But, Zina, I love you; I adore you, darling, and you repel me like this! I am working for your happiness, child!”

Tears sparkled in her eyes. Maria Alexandrovna really loved her daughter, in her own way, and just now she actually felt deeply, for once in her life—thanks to her agitation, and the success of her eloquence.

Zina, in spite of her present distorted view of things in general, knew that her mother loved her; but this love only annoyed her; she would much rather—it would have been easier for her—if it had been hate!

“Well, well; don't be angry, mamma—I'm so excited just now!” she said, to soothe her mother's feelings.

“I'm not angry, I'm not angry, darling! I know you are much agitated!” cried Maria Alexandrovna. “You say, my child, that you wish me to be candid: very well, I will; I will be quite frank, I assure you. But you might have trusted me! Firstly, then, I must tell you that I have no actually organized plan yet—no detailed plan, that is. You must understand, with that clever little head of yours, you must see, Zina, that I cannot have such a plan, all cut out. I even anticipate some difficulties. Why, that magpie of a woman has just been telling me all sorts of things. We ought to be quick, by the bye; you see, I am quite open with you! But I swear to you that the end shall be attained!” she added, ecstatically. “My convictions are not the result of a poetical nature, as you told me just now; they are founded on facts. I rely on the weakness of the prince's intellect—which is a canvas upon which one can stitch any pattern one pleases!

“The only fear is, we may be interfered with! But a fool of a woman like that is not going to get the better of me!” she added, stamping her foot, and with flashing eyes. “That's my part of the business, though; and to manage it thoroughly I must begin as soon as possible—in fact, the whole thing, or the most important part of it, must be arranged this very day!”

“Very well, mamma; but now listen to one more piece of candour. Do you know why I am so interested in your plan of operations, and do not trust it? because I am not sure of myself! I have told you already that I consent to this—meanness; but I must warn you that if I find the details of your plan of operations too dirty, too mean and repulsive, I shall not be able to stand it, and shall assuredly throw you over. I know that this is a new pettiness, to consent to a wicked thing and then fear the dirt in which it floats! But what's to be done? So it will be, and I warn you!”

“But Zina, dear child, where is the wickedness in this?” asked Maria Alexandrovna timidly. “It is simply a matter of a marriage for profit; everybody does it! Look at it in this light, and you will see there is nothing particular in it; it is good 'form' enough!”

“Oh, mamma, don't try to play the fox over me! Don't you see that I have consented to everything—to everything? What else do you require of me? Don't be alarmed if I call things by their proper names! For all you know it may be my only comfort!” And a bitter smile played over her lips.

“Very well, very well, dear! we may disagree as to ideas and yet be very fond of one another. But if you are afraid of the working of my plan, and dread that you will see any baseness or meanness about it, leave it all to me, dear, and I guarantee you that not a particle of dirt shall soil you! Your hands shall be clean! As if I would be the one to compromise you! Trust me entirely, and all shall go grandly and with dignity; all shall be done worthily; there shall be no scandal—even if there be a whisper afterwards, we shall all be out of the way, far off! We shall not stay here, of course! Let them howl if they like, we won't care. Besides, they are not worth bothering about, and I wonder at your being so frightened of these people, Zina. Don't be angry with me! how can you be so frightened, with your

proud nature?"

"I'm not frightened; you don't understand me a bit!" said Zina, in a tone of annoyance.

"Very well, darling; don't be angry. I only talk like this because these people about here are always stirring up mud, if they can; while you—this is the first time in your life you have done a mean action.—Mean action! What an old fool I am! On the contrary, this is a most generous, noble act! I'll prove this to you once more, Zina. Firstly, then, it all depends upon the point of view you take up—"

"Oh! bother your proofs, mother. I've surely had enough of them by now," cried Zina angrily, and stamped her foot on the floor.

"Well, darling, I won't; it was stupid of me—I won't!"

There was another moment's silence. Maria Alexandrovna looked into her daughter's eyes as a little dog looks into the eyes of its mistress.

"I don't understand how you are going to set about it," said Zina at last, in a tone of disgust. "I feel sure you will only plunge yourself into a pool of shame! I'm not thinking of these people about here. I despise their opinions; but it would be very ignominious for you."

"Oh! if that's all, my dear child, don't bother your head about it: please, please don't! Let us be agreed about it, and then you need not fear for me. Dear me! if you but knew, though, what things I have done, and kept my skin whole! I tell you this is nothing in comparison with real difficulties which I have arranged successfully. Only let me try. But, first of all we must get the prince alone, and that as soon as possible. That's the first move: all the rest will depend upon the way we manage this. However, I can foresee the result. They'll all rise against us; but I'll manage them all right! I'm a little nervous about Mosgliakoff. He—"

"Mosgliakoff!" said Zina, contemptuously.

"Yes, but don't you be afraid, Zina! I'll give you my word I'll work him so that he shall help us himself. You don't know me yet, my Zina. My child, when I heard about this old prince having arrived this morning, the idea, as it were, shone out all at once in my brain! Who would have thought of his really coming to us like this! It is a chance such as you might wait for a thousand years in vain. Zina, my angel! there's no shame in what you are doing. What is wrong is to marry a man whom you loathe. Your marriage with the prince will be no real marriage; it is simply a domestic contract. It is he, the old fool, who gains by it. It is he who is made unspeakably, immeasurably happy. Oh! Zina, how lovely you look to-day. If I were a man I would give you half a kingdom if you but raised your finger for it! Asses they all are! Who wouldn't kiss a hand like this?" and Maria Alexandrovna kissed her daughter's hand warmly. "Why, this is my own flesh and blood, Zina. What's to be done afterwards? You won't part with me, will you? You won't drive your old mother away when you are happy yourself? No, darling, for though we have quarrelled often enough, you have not such another friend as I am, Zina! You—"

"Mamma, if you've made up your mind to it all, perhaps it is time you set about making some move in the matter. We are losing time," said Zina, impatiently.

"Yes, it is, it is indeed time; and here am I gabbling on while they are all doing their best to seduce the prince away from us. I must be off at once. I shall find them, and bring the prince back by force, if need be. Good-bye, Zina, darling child. Don't be afraid, and don't look sad, dear; please don't! It will be all well, nay, gloriously well! Good-bye, good-bye!"

Maria Alexandrovna made the sign of the Cross over Zina, and dashed out of the room. She stopped one moment at her looking-glass to see that all was right, and then, in another minute, was seated in her carriage and careering through the Mordasoff streets. Maria Alexandrovna lived in good style, and her carriage was always in waiting at that hour in case of need.

"No, no, my dears! it's not for you to outwit me," she thought, as she drove along. "Zina agrees; so half the work is done. Oh, Zina, Zina! so your imagination is susceptible to pretty little visions, is it? and I did treat her to a pretty little picture. She was really touched at last; and how lovely the child looked to-day! If I had her beauty I should turn half Europe topsy-turvy. But wait a bit, it's all right. Shakespeare will fly away to another world when you're a princess, my dear, and know a few people. What does she know? Mordasoff and the tutor! And what a princess she will make. I love to see her pride and pluck. She looks at you like any queen. And not to know her own good! However, she soon will. Wait a bit; let this old fool die, and then the boy, and I'll marry her to a reigning prince yet! The only thing I'm afraid of is—haven't I trusted her too much? Didn't I allow my feelings to run away with me too far? I am anxious about her. I am anxious, anxious!"

Thus Maria Alexandrovna reflected as she drove along. She was a busy woman, was Maria Alexandrovna.

Zina, left alone, continued her solitary walk up and down the room with folded hands and thoughtful brow. She had a good deal to think of! Over and over again she repeated, "It's time—it's time—oh, it's time!" What did this ejaculation mean? Once or twice tears glistened on her long silken eyelashes, and she did not attempt to wipe them away.

Her mother worried herself in vain, as far as Zina was concerned; for her daughter had quite made up her mind:—she was ready, come what might!

"Wait a bit!" said the widow to herself, as she picked her way out of her hiding-place, after having observed and listened to the interview between Zina and her mother. "And I was thinking of a wedding dress for myself; I positively thought the prince would really come my way! So much for my wedding dress—what a fool I was! Oho! Maria Alexandrovna—I'm a baggage, am I—and a beggar;—and I took a bribe of two hundred roubles from you, did I? And I didn't spend it on expenses connected with your precious daughter's letter, did I? and break open a desk for your sake with my own hands! Yes, madam; I'll teach you what sort of a baggage Nastasia Petrovna is; both of you shall know her a little better yet! Wait a bit!"

CHAPTER VII.

Maria Alexandrovna's genius had conceived a great and daring project.

To marry her daughter to a rich man, a prince, and a cripple; to marry her secretly, to take advantage of the senile feebleness of her guest, to marry her daughter to this old man burglariously, as her enemies would call it,—was not only a daring, it was a downright audacious, project.

Of course, in case of success, it would be a profitable undertaking enough; but in the event of non-success, what an ignominious position for the authors of such a failure.

Maria Alexandrovna knew all this, but she did not despair. She had been through deeper mire than this, as she had rightly informed Zina.

Undoubtedly all this looked rather too like a robbery on the high road to be altogether pleasant; but Maria Alexandrovna did not dwell much on this thought. She had one very simple but very pointed notion on the subject: namely, this—"once married they can't be unmarried again."

It was a simple, but very pleasant reflection, and the very thought of it gave Maria Alexandrovna a tingling sensation in all her limbs. She was in a great state of agitation, and sat in her carriage as if on pins and needles. She was anxious to begin the fray: her grand plan of operations was drawn up; but there were thousands of small details to be settled, and these must depend upon circumstances. She was not agitated by fear of failure—oh dear, no! all she minded was delay! she feared the delay and obstructions that might be put in her way by the Mordasoff ladies, whose pretty ways she knew so well! She was well aware that probably at this moment the whole town knew all about her present intentions, though she had not revealed them to a living soul. She had found out by painful experience that nothing, not the most secret event, could happen in her house in the morning but it was known at the farthest end of the town by the evening.

Of course, no anticipation, no presentiment, deterred or deceived Maria Alexandrovna: she might feel such sensations at times, but she despised them. Now, this is what had happened in the town this morning, and of which our heroine was as yet only partly informed. About mid-day, that is, just three hours after the prince's arrival at Mordasoff, extraordinary rumours began to circulate about the town.

Whence came they? Who spread them? None could say; but they spread like wild-fire. Everyone suddenly began to assure his neighbour that Maria Alexandrovna had engaged her daughter to the prince; that Mosgliakoff had notice to quit, and that all was settled and signed, and the penniless, twenty-three-year-old Zina was to be the princess.

Whence came this rumour? Could it be that Maria Alexandrovna was so thoroughly known that her friends could anticipate her thoughts and actions under any given circumstances?

The fact is, every inhabitant of a provincial town lives under a glass case; there is no possibility of his keeping anything whatever secret from his honourable co-dwellers in the place. They know everything; they know it, too, better than he does himself. Every provincial person should be a psychologist by nature; and that is why I have been surprised, often and often, to observe when I am among provincials that there is not a great number of psychologists—as one would expect,—but an infinite number of dreadful asses. However, this a digression.

The rumour thus spread, then, was a thunder-like and startling shock to the Mordasoff system. Such a marriage—a marriage with this prince—appeared to all to be a thing so very desirable, so brilliant, that the strange side of the affair had not seemed to strike anyone as yet!

One more circumstance must be noticed. Zina was even more detested in the place than her mother; why, I don't know. Perhaps her beauty was the prime cause. Perhaps, too, it was that Maria Alexandrovna was, as it were, one of themselves, a fruit of their own soil: if she was to go away she might even be missed; she kept the place alive more or less—it might be dull without her! But with Zina it was quite a different matter: she lived more in the clouds than in the town of Mordasoff. She was no company for these good people; she could not pair with them. Perhaps she bore herself towards them, unconsciously though, too haughtily.

And now this same Zina, this haughty girl, about whom there were certain scandalous stories afloat, this same Zina was to become a millionaire, a princess, and a woman

of rank and eminence!

In a couple of years she might marry again, some duke, perhaps, or a general, maybe a Governor; their own Governor was a widower, and very fond of the ladies! Then she would be the first lady of their province! Why, the very thought of such a thing would be intolerable: in fact, this rumour of Zina's marriage with the prince aroused more irritation in Mordasoff than any other piece of gossip within the memory of man!

People told each other that it was a sin and a shame, that the prince was crazy, that the old man was being deceived, caught, robbed—anything you like; that the prince must be saved from the bloodthirsty talons he had floundered into; that the thing was simply robbery, immorality. And why were any others worse than Zina? Why should not somebody else marry the prince?

Maria Alexandrovna only guessed at all this at present—but that was quite enough. She knew that the whole town would rise up and use all and every means to defeat her ends. Why, they had tried to “confiscate” the prince already; she would have to retrieve him by force, and if she should succeed in luring or forcing him back now, she could not keep him tied to her apron-strings for ever. Again, what was to prevent this whole troop of Mordasoff gossips from coming en masse to her salon, under such a plausible plea, too, that she would not be able to turn them out. She knew well that if kicked out of the door these good people would get in at the window—a thing which had actually happened before now at Mordasoff.

In a word, there was not an hour, not a moment to be lost; and meanwhile things were not even begun. A brilliant idea now struck Maria Alexandrovna. We shall hear what this idea was in its proper place, meanwhile I will only state that my heroine dashed through the streets of Mordasoff, looking like a threatening storm-cloud as she swept along full of the stern and implacable resolve that the prince should come back if she had to drag him, and fight for him; and that all Mordasoff might fall in ruins but she should have her way!

Her first move was successful—it could not have been more so.

She chanced to meet the prince in the street, and carried him off to dinner with her.

If my reader wishes to know how this feat was accomplished with such a circle of enemies about and around her, and how she managed to make such a fool of Mrs. Antipova, then I must be allowed to point out that such a question is an insult to Maria Alexandrovna. As if she were not capable of outwitting any Antipova that ever breathed!

She simply “arrested” the prince at her rival's very door, as he alighted there with Mosgliakoff, in spite of the latter's terror of a scandal, and in spite of everything else; and she popped the old man into the carriage beside her. Of course the prince made very little resistance, and as usual, forgot all about the episode in a couple of minutes, and was as happy as possible.

At dinner he was hilarious to a degree; he made jokes and fun, and told stories which had no ends, or which he tacked on to ends belonging to other stories, without remarking the fact.

He had had three glasses of champagne at lunch at Natalie Dimitrievna's. He now took more wine, and his old head whirled with it. Maria Alexandrovna plied him well. The dinner was very good: the mistress of the house kept the company alive with most bewitching airs and manners,—at least so it should have been, but all excepting herself and the prince were terribly dull on this occasion. Zina sat

silent and grave. Mosgliakoff was clearly off his feed: he was very thoughtful; and as this was unusual Maria Alexandrovna was considerably anxious about him. The widow looked cross and cunning; she continually made mysterious signs to Mosgliakoff on the sly; but the latter took no notice of them.

If the mistress herself had not been so amiable and bewitching, the dinner party might have been mistaken for a lunch at a funeral!

Meanwhile Maria Alexandrovna's condition of mind was in reality excited and agitated to a terrible degree. Zina alone terrified her by her tragic look and tearful eyes. And there was another difficulty—for that accursed Mosgliakoff would probably sit about and get in the way of business! One could not well set about it with him in the room!

So, Maria Alexandrovna rose from the table in some agitation.

But what was her amazement, her joyful surprise, when Mosgliakoff came up to her after dinner, of his own accord, and suddenly and most unexpectedly informed her that he must—to his infinite regret—leave the house on important business for a short while.

"Why, where are you going to?" she asked, with great show of regret.

"Well, you see," began Mosgliakoff, rather disconcerted and uncomfortable, "I have to—may I come to you for advice?"

"What is it—what is it?"

"Why, you see, my godfather Borodueff—you know the man; I met him in the street to-day, and he is dreadfully angry with me, says I am grown so proud, that though I have been in Mordasoff three times I have never shown my nose inside his doors. He asked me to come in for a cup of tea at five—it's four now. He has no children, you know,—and he is worth a million of roubles—more, they say; and if I marry Zina—you see,—and he's seventy years old now!"

"Why, my good boy, of course, of course!—what are you thinking of? You must not neglect that sort of thing—go at once, of course! I thought you looked preoccupied at dinner. You ought to have gone this morning and shewn him that you cared for him, and so on. Oh, you boys, you boys!" cried Maria Alexandrovna with difficulty concealing her joy.

"Thanks, thanks, Maria Alexandrovna! you've made a man of me again! I declare I quite feared telling you—for I know you didn't think much of the connection.—He is a common sort of old fellow, I know! So good-bye—my respects to Zina, and apologies—I must be off, of course I shall be back soon!"

"Good-bye—take my blessing with you; say something polite to the old man for me; I have long changed my opinion of him; I have grown to like the real old Russian style of the man. Au revoir, mon ami, au revoir!"

"Well, it is a mercy that the devil has carried him off, out of the way!" she reflected, flushing with joy as Paul took his departure out of the room. But Paul had only just reached the hall and was putting on his fur coat when to him appeared—goodness knows whence—the widow, Nastasia Petrovna. She had been waiting for him.

"Where are you going to?" she asked, holding him by the arm.

"To my godfather Borodueff's—a rich old fellow; I want him to leave me money. Excuse me—I'm in rather a hurry!"

Mosgliakoff was in a capital humour!

"Oh! then say good-bye to your betrothed!" remarked the widow, cuttingly.

"And why 'good-bye'?"

"Why; you think she's yours already, do you? and they are going to marry her to the prince! I heard them say so myself!"

"To the prince? Oh, come now, Nastasia Petrovna!"

"Oh, it's not a case of 'come now' at all! Would you like to see and hear it for yourself? Put down your coat, and come along here,—this way!"

"Excuse me, Nastasia Petrovna, but I don't understand what you are driving at!"

"Oh! you'll understand fast enough if you just bend down here and listen! The comedy is probably just beginning!"

"What comedy?"

"Hush! don't talk so loud! The comedy of humbugging you. This morning, when you went away with the prince, Maria Alexandrovna spent a whole hour talking Zina over into marrying the old man! She told her that nothing was easier than to lure the prince into marrying her; and all sorts of other things that were enough to make one sick! Zina agreed. You should have heard the pretty way in which you were spoken of! They think you simply a fool! Zina said plump out that she would never marry you! Listen now, listen!"

"Why—why—it would be most godless cunning," Paul stammered, looking sheepishly into Nastasia's eyes.

"Well, just you listen—you'll hear that, and more besides!"

"But how am I to listen?"

"Here, bend down here. Do you see that keyhole!"

"Oh! but, Nastasia Petrovna, I can't eavesdrop, you know!"

"Oh, nonsense, nonsense! Put your pride in your pocket! You've come, and you must listen now!"

"Well, at all events—"

"Oh! if you can't bear to be an eavesdropper, let it alone, and be made a fool of! One goes out of one's way solely out of pity for you, and you must needs make difficulties! What is it to me? I'm not doing this for myself! I shall leave the house before night, in any case!"

Paul, steeling his heart, bent to the keyhole.

His pulses were raging and throbbing. He did not realise what was going on, or what he was doing, or where he was.

CHAPTER VIII.

"So you were very gay, prince, at Natalia Dimitrievna's?" asked Maria Alexandrovna,

surveying the battlefield before her; she was anxious to begin the conversation as innocently as possible; but her heart beat loud with hope and agitation.

After dinner the Prince had been carried off to the salon, where he was first received in the morning. Maria Alexandrovna prided herself on this room, and always used it on state occasions.

The old man, after his six glasses of champagne, was not very steady on his legs; but he talked away all the more, for the same reason.

Surveying the field of battle before the fray, Maria Alexandrovna had observed with satisfaction that the voluptuous old man had already begun to regard Zina with great tenderness, and her maternal heart beat high with joy.

"Oh! ch-charming-very gay indeed!" replied the prince, "and, do you know, Nat-alia Dimitrievna is a wo-wonderful woman, a ch-charming woman!"

Howsoever busy with her own high thoughts and exalted ideas, Maria Alexandrovna's heart waxed wrathful to hear such a loud blast of praise on her rival's account.

"Oh! Prince," she began, with flashing eyes, "if Natalia Dimitrievna is a charming woman in your eyes, then I really don't know what to think! After such a statement, dear Prince, you must not claim to know society here-no, no!"

"Really! You sur-pr-prize me!"

"I assure you-I assure you, mon cher Prince! Listen Zina, I must just tell the prince that absurd story about what Natalia Dimitrievna did when she was here last week. Dearest prince, I am not a scandal-monger, but I must, I really must tell you this, if only to make you laugh, and to show you a living picture, as it were, of what people are like in this place! Well, last week this Natalia Dimitrievna came to call upon me. Coffee was brought in, and I had to leave the room for a moment-I forget why-at all events, I went out. Now, I happened to have remarked how much sugar there was in the silver sugar basin; it was quite full. Well, I came back in a few minutes-looked at the sugar basin, and!-three lumps-three little wretched lumps at the very bottom of the basin, prince!-and she was all alone in the room, mind! Now that woman has a large house of her own, and lots of money! Of course this is merely a funny story-but you can judge from this what sort of people one has to deal with here!"

"N-no! you don't mean it!" said the prince, in real astonishment. "What a gr-eedy woman! Do you mean to say she ate it all up?"

"There, prince, and that's your 'charming woman!' What do you think of that nice little bit of lady-like conduct? I think I should have died of shame if I had ever allowed myself to do such a dirty thing as that!"

"Ye-yes, ye-yes! but, do you know, she is a real 'belle femme' all the same!"

"What! Natalia Dimitrievna? My dear prince; why, she is a mere tub of a woman! Oh! prince, prince! what have you said? I expected far better taste of you, prince!"

"Ye-yes, tub-tub, of course! but she's a n-nice figure, a nice figure! And the girl who danced-oh! a nice figure too, a very nice figure of a wo-woman!"

"What, Sonia? Why she's a mere child, prince? She's only thirteen years old."

"Ye-yes, ye-yes, of course; but her figure de-velops very fast-charming, charming! And the other da-ancing girl, she's de-veloping too-nicely: she's dirty rather-she

might have washed her hands, but very attractive, charming!" and the prince raised his glass again and hungrily inspected Zina. "Mais quelle charmante personne!—what a lovely girl!" he muttered, melting with satisfaction.

"Zina, play us something, or—better still, sing us a song! How she sings, prince! she's an artiste—a real artiste; oh if you only knew, dear prince," continued Maria Alexandrovna, in a half whisper, as Zina rose to go to the piano with her stately but quiet gait and queenly composure, which evidently told upon the old man; "if you only knew what a daughter that is to me! how she can love; how tender, how affectionate she is to me! what taste she has, what a heart!"

"Ye—yes! ye—yes! taste. And do you know, I have only known one woman in all my life who could compare with her in love—liness. It was the late Countess Nainsky: she died thirty years ago, a wonderful woman, and her beauty was quite surpassing. She married her cook at last."

"Her cook, prince?"

"Ye—yes, her cook, a Frenchman, abroad. She bought him a count's title abroad; he was a good-looking fellow enough, with little moustaches—"

"And how did they get on?"

"Oh, very well indeed; however, they parted very soon; they quarrelled about some sa—sauce. He robbed her—and bolted."

"Mamma, what shall I play?" asked Zina.

"Better sing us something, Zina. How she sings, prince! Do you like music?"

"Oh, ye—yes! charming, charming. I love music passionately. I knew Beethoven, abroad."

"Knew Beethoven!" cried Maria Alexandrovna, ecstatically. "Imagine, Zina, the prince knew Beethoven! Oh, prince, did you really, really know the great Beethoven?"

"Ye—yes, we were great friends, Beethoven and I; he was always taking snuff—such a funny fellow!"

"What, Beethoven?"

"Yes, Beethoven; or it may have been some other German fellow—I don't know; there are a great many Germans there. I forget."

"Well, what shall I sing, mamma?" asked Zina again.

"Oh Zina darling, do sing us that lovely ballad all about knights, you know, and the girl who lived in a castle and loved a troubadour. Don't you know! Oh, prince, how I do love all those knightly stories and songs, and the castles! Oh! the castles, and life in the middle ages, and the troubadours, and heralds and all. Shall I accompany you, Zina? Sit down near here, prince. Oh! those castles, those castles!"

"Ye—yes, ye—yes, castles; I love castles too!" observed the prince, staring at Zina all the while with the whole of his one eye, as if he would like to eat her up at once. "But, good heavens," he cried, "that song! I know that song. I heard that song years—years ago! Oh! how that song reminds me of something. Oh, oh."

I will not attempt to describe the ecstatic state of the prince while Zina sang.

She warbled an old French ballad which had once been all the fashion. Zina sang it beautifully; her lovely face, her glorious eyes, her fine sweet contralto voice, all this went to the prince's heart at once; and her dark thick hair, her heaving bosom, her proud, beautiful, stately figure as she sat at the piano, and played and sang, quite finished him. He never took his eyes off her, he panted with excitement. His old heart, partially revived with champagne, with the music, and with awakening recollections (and who is there who has no beloved memories of the past?), his old heart beat faster and faster. It was long since it had last beat in this way. He was ready to fall on his knees at her feet, when Zina stopped singing, and he was almost in tears with various emotions.

"Oh, my charming, charming child," he cried, putting his lips to her fingers, "you have ravished me quite-quite! I remember all now. Oh charming, charming child!"

The poor prince could not finish his sentence.

Maria Alexandrovna felt that the moment had arrived for her to make a move.

"Why, why do you bury yourself alive as you do, prince?" she began, solemnly. "So much taste, so much vital energy, so many rich gifts of the mind and soul—and to hide yourself in solitude all your days; to flee from mankind, from your friends. Oh, it is unpardonable! Prince, bethink yourself. Look up at life again with open eyes. Call up your dear memories of the past; think of your golden youth—your golden, careless, happy days of youth! Wake them, wake them from the dead, Prince! and wake yourself, too; and recommence life among men and women and society! Go abroad—to Italy, to Spain, oh, to Spain, Prince! You must have a guide, a heart that will love and respect, and sympathize with you! You have friends; summon them about you! Give the word, and they will rally round you in crowds! I myself will be the first to throw up everything, and answer to your cry! I remembered our old friendship, my Prince; and I will sacrifice husband, home, all, and follow you. Yes, and were I but young and lovely, like my daughter here, I would be your fellow, your friend, your wife, if you said but the word!"

"And I am convinced that you were a most charming creature in your day, too!" said the prince, blowing his nose violently. His eyes were full of tears.

"We live again in our children," said Maria Alexandrovna, with great feeling. "I, too, have my guardian angel, and that is this child, my daughter, Prince, the partner of my heart and of all my thoughts! She has refused seven offers because she is unwilling to leave me! So that she will go too, when you accompany me abroad."

"In that case, I shall certainly go abroad," cried the prince with animation. "Assuredly I shall go! And if only I could venture to hope—oh! you bewitching child, charming, bewitching child!" And the prince recommenced to kiss Zina's fingers. The poor old man was evidently meditating going down on his knees before her.

"But, Prince," began Maria Alexandrovna again, feeling that the opportunity had arrived for another display of eloquence. "But, Prince, you say, 'If only I could flatter myself into indulging any hope!' Why, what a strange man you are, Prince. Surely you do not suppose that you are unworthy the flattering attention of any woman! It is not only youth that constitutes true beauty. Remember that you are, so to speak, a chip of the tree of aristocracy. You are a representative of all the most knightly, most refined taste and culture and manners. Did not Maria fall in love with the old man Mazeppa? I remember reading that Lauzun, that fascinating marquis of the court of Louis (I forget which), when he was an old, bent and bowed

man, won the heart of one of the youngest and most beautiful women about the court.

"And who told you you are an old man? Who taught you that nonsense? Do men like you ever grow old? You, with your wealth of taste and wit, and animation and vital energy and brilliant manners! Just you make your appearance at some watering-place abroad with a young wife on your arm—some lovely young girl like my Zina, for instance—of course I merely mention her as an example, nothing more,—and you will see at once what a colossal effect you will produce: you, a scion of our aristocracy; she a beauty among beauties! You will lead her triumphantly on your arm; she, perhaps, will sing in some brilliant assemblage; you will delight the company with your wit. Why, all the people of the place will crowd to see you! All Europe will ring with your renown, for every newspaper and feuilleton at the Waters will be full of you. And yet you say, 'If I could but venture to hope,' indeed!"

"The feuilletons! yes—ye—yes, and the newspapers," said the prince, growing more and more feeble with love, but not understanding half of Maria Alexandrovna's tall talk. "But, my child, if you're not tired, do repeat that song which you have just sung so charmingly once more."

"Oh! but, Prince, she has other lovely songs, still prettier ones; don't you remember L'Hirondelle? You must have heard it, haven't you?"

"Ye—yes, I remember it; at least I've forgotten it. No, no! the one you have just sung. I don't want the Hir—ondelle! I want that other song," whined the prince, just like an child.

Zina sang again.

This time the prince could not contain himself; he fell on his knees at her feet, he cried, he sobbed:

"Oh, my beautiful chatelaine!" he cried in his shaky old voice—shaky with old age and emotion combined. "Oh, my charming, charming chatelaine! oh, my dear child! You have re—minded me of so much that is long, long passed! I always thought then that things must be fairer in the future than in the present. I used to sing duets with the vis—countess in this very ballad! And now, oh! I don't know what to do, I don't know what to do!"

The prince panted and choked as he spoke; his tongue seemed to find it difficult to move; some of his words were almost unintelligible. It was clear that he was in the last stage of emotional excitement. Maria Alexandrovna immediately poured oil on the fire.

"Why, Prince, I do believe you are falling in love with my Zina," she cried, feeling that the moment was a solemn one.

The prince's reply surpassed her fondest expectations.

"I am madly in love with her!" cried the old man, all animated, of a sudden. He was still on his knees, and he trembled with excitement as he spoke. "I am ready to give my life for her! And if only I could hope, if only I might have a little hope—I,—but, lift me up; I feel so weak. I—if only she would give me the hope that I might offer her my heart, I—she should sing ballads to me every day; and I could look at her, and look and gaze and gaze at her.—Oh, my God! my God!"

"Prince, Prince! you are offering her your hand. You want to take her from me, my Zina! my darling, my ange, my own dear child, Zina! No, Zina, no, I can't let you go! They must tear you from me, Zina. They must tear you first from your mother's arms!"

Maria Alexandrovna sprang to her daughter, and caught her up in a close embrace, conscious, withal, of serious physical resistance on Zina's part. The fond mother was a little overdoing it.

Zina felt this with all her soul, and she looked on at the whole comedy with inexpressible loathing.

However, she held her tongue, and that was all the fond mother required of her.

"She has refused nine men because she will not leave me!" said Maria. "But this time, I fear—my heart tells me that we are doomed to part! I noticed just now how she looked at you, Prince. You have impressed her with your aristocratic manner, with your refinement. Oh! Prince, you are going to separate us—I feel it, I feel it!"

"I ad-ore her!" murmured the poor old man, still trembling like an autumnal leaf.

"And you'll consent to leave your mother!" cried Maria Alexandrovna, throwing herself upon her daughter once more. Zina made haste to bring this, to her, painful scene to an end. She stretched her pretty hand silently to the prince, and even forced herself to smile. The prince reverently took the little hand into his own, and covered it with kisses.

"I am only this mo-ment beginning to live," he muttered, in a voice that seemed choking with rapture and ecstasy.

"Zina," began Maria Alexandrovna, solemnly, "look well at this man! This is the most honest and upright and noble man of all the men I know. He is a knight of the middle ages! But she knows it, Prince, she knows it too well; to my grief I say it. Oh! why did you come here? I am surrendering my treasure to you—my angel! Oh! take care of her, Prince. Her mother entreats you to watch over her. And what mother could blame my grief!"

"Enough, mamma! that's enough," said Zina, quietly.

"Protect her from all hurt and insult, Prince! Can I rely upon your sword to flash in the face of the vile scandal-monger who dares to offend my Zina?"

"Enough, mother, I tell you! am I—?"

"Ye—yes, ye—yes, it shall flash all right," said the prince. "But I want to be married now, at once. I—I'm only just learning what it is to live. I want to send off to Donchanovo at once. I want to send for some di-iamonds I have there. I want to lay them at her feet.—I—"

"What noble ardour! what ecstasy of love! what noble, generous feelings you have, Prince!" cried Maria Alexandrovna. "And you could bury yourself—bury yourself, far from the world and society! I shall remind you of this a thousand times! I go mad when I think of that hellish woman."

"What could I do? I was fri-ghtened!" stammered the prince in a whining voice: "they wanted to put me in a lu-unatic asylum! I was dreadfully alarmed!"

"In a lunatic asylum? Ah, the scoundrels! oh, the inhuman wretches! Ah, the low cunning of them! Yes, Prince; I had heard of it. But the lunacy was in these people, not in you. Why, why was it—what for?"

"I don't know myself, what it was for," replied the poor old man, feebly sinking

into his chair; "I was at a ball, don't you know, and told some anecdote or other and they didn't like it; and so they got up a scandal and a row."

"Surely that was not all, Prince?"

"No;—the—I was playing cards with Prince Paul De-mentieff, and I was cleared out: you see, I had two kings and three queens, three kings and two queens; or I should say—one king—and some queens—I know I had—."

"And it was for this? Oh, the hellish inhumanity of some people! You are weeping, Prince; but be of good cheer—it is all over now! Now I shall be at hand, dearest Prince,—I shall not leave Zina; and we shall see which of them will dare to say a word to you, then! And do you know, my Prince, your marriage will expose them! it will shame them! They will see that you are a man—that a lovely girl like our Zina would never have married a madman! You shall raise your head proudly now, and look them straight in the face!"

"Ye—yes; I shall look them straight in the face!" murmured the prince, slowly shutting his eyes.

Maria Alexandrovna saw that her work was done: the prince was tired out with love and emotion. She was only wasting her eloquence!

"Prince, you are disturbed and tired, I see you are!" she said; "you must rest, you must take a good rest after so much agitation," she added, bending over him maternally.

"Ye—yes, ye—yes; I should like to lie down a little," said the old man.

"Of course, of course! you must lie down! those agitating scenes—stop, I will escort you myself, and arrange your couch with my own hands! Why are you looking so hard at that portrait, Prince? That is my mother's picture; she was an angel—not a woman! Oh, why is she not among us at this joyful moment!"

"Ye—yes; charming—charming! Do you know, I had a mother too,—a princess, and imagine! a remarkably, a remarkably fat woman she was; but that is not what I was going to say,—I—I feel a little weak, and—Au revoir, my charming child—to-morrow—to-day—I will—I—I—Au revoir, au revoir!" Here the poor old fellow tried to kiss his hand, but slipped, and nearly fell over the threshold of the door.

"Take care, dear Prince—take care! lean on my arm!" cried Maria Alexandrovna.

"Charming, charming!" he muttered, as he left the room. "I am only now learning to live!"

Zina was left alone.

A terrible oppression weighed down her heart. She felt a sensation of loathing which nearly suffocated her. She despised herself—her cheeks burned. With folded hands, and teeth biting hard into her lips, she stood in one spot, motionless. The tears of shame streamed from her eyes,—and at this moment the door opened, and Paul Mosgliakoff entered the room!

CHAPTER IX.

He had heard all—

He did not actually enter the room, but stood at the door, pale with excitement and fury. Zina looked at him in amazement.

"So that's the sort of person you are!" he cried panting. "At last I have found you out, have I?"

"Found me out?" repeated Zina, looking at him as though he were a madman. Suddenly her eyes flashed with rage. "How dare you address me like that?" she cried, advancing towards him.

"I have heard all!" said Mosgliakoff solemnly, but involuntarily taking a step backwards.

"You heard? I see—you have been eavesdropping!" cried Zina, looking at him with disdain.

"Yes, I have been eavesdropping! Yes—I consented to do a mean action, and my reward is that I have found out that you, too, are—I don't know how to express to you what I think you!" he replied, looking more and more timid under Zina's eyes.

"And supposing that you have heard all: what right have you to blame me? What right have you to speak to me so insolently, in any case?"

"I!—I? what right have I? and you can ask me this? You are going to marry this prince, and I have no right to say a word! Why, you gave me your promise—is that nothing?"

"When?"

"How, when?"

"Did not I tell you that morning, when you came to me with your sentimental nonsense—did I not tell you that I could give you no decided answer?"

"But you did not reject me; you did not send me away. I see—you kept me hanging in reserve, in case of need! You lured me into your net! I see, I see it all!"

An expression of pain flitted over Zina's careworn face, as though someone had suddenly stabbed her to the heart; but she mastered her feelings.

"If I didn't turn you out of the house," she began deliberately and very clearly, though her voice had a scarcely perceptible tremor in it, "I refrained from such a course purely out of pity. You begged me yourself to postpone, to give you time, not to say you 'No,' to study you better, and 'then,' you said, 'then, when you know what a fine fellow I am, perhaps you will not refuse me!' These were your own words, or very like them, at the very beginning of your courtship!—you cannot deny them! And now you dare to tell me that I 'lured you into my net,' just as though you did not notice my expression of loathing when you made your appearance this morning! You came a fortnight sooner than I expected you, and I did not hide my disgust; on the contrary, I made it evident—you must have noticed it—I know you did; because you asked me whether I was angry because you had come sooner than you promised! Let me tell you that people who do not, and do not care to, hide their loathing for a man can hardly be accused of luring that man into their net! You dare to tell me that I was keeping you in reserve! Very well; my answer to that is, that I judged of you like this: 'Though he may not be endowed with much intellect, still he may turn out to be a good enough fellow; and if so, it might be possible to marry him.' However, being persuaded, now, that you are a fool, and a mischievous fool into the bargain,—having found out this fact, to my great joy,—it only remains for me now to wish you every happiness and a pleasant journey. Good-bye!"

With these words Zina turned her back on him, and deliberately made for the door.

Mosgliakoff, seeing that all was lost, boiled over with fury.

"Oh! so I'm a fool!" he yelled; "I'm a fool, am I? Very well, good-bye! But before I go, the whole town shall know of this! They shall all hear how you and your mother made the old man drunk, and then swindled him! I shall let the whole world know it! You shall see what Mosgliakoff can do!"

Zina trembled and stopped, as though to answer; but on reflection, she contented herself by shrugging her shoulders; glanced contemptuously at Mosgliakoff, and left the room, banging the door after her.

At this moment Maria Alexandrovna made her appearance. She heard Mosgliakoff's exclamation, and, divining at once what had happened, trembled with terror. Mosgliakoff still in the house, and near the prince! Mosgliakoff about to spread the news all over the town! At this moment, when secrecy, if only for a short time, was essential! But Maria Alexandrovna was quick at calculations: she thought, with an eagle flight of the mind, over all the circumstances of the case, and her plan for the pacification of Mosgliakoff was ready in an instant!

"What is it, mon ami?" she said, entering the room, and holding out her hand to him with friendly warmth.

"How—'mon ami?' " cried the enraged Mosgliakoff. "Mon ami, indeed! the moment after you have abused and reviled me like a pickpocket! No, no! Not quite so green, my good lady! I'm not to be so easily imposed upon again!"

"I am sorry, extremely sorry, to see you in such a strange condition of mind, Paul Alexandrovitch! What expressions you use! You do not take the trouble to choose your words before ladies—oh, fie!"

"Before ladies? Ho ho! You—you are—you are anything you like—but not a lady!" yelled Mosgliakoff.

I don't quite know what he meant, but it was something very terrible, you may be sure!

Maria Alexandrovna looked benignly in his face:

"Sit down!" she said, sorrowfully, showing him a chair, the same that the old prince had reclined in a quarter of an hour before.

"But listen, will you listen, Maria Alexandrovna? You look at me just as though you were not the least to blame; in fact, as though I were the guilty party! Really, Maria Alexandrovna, this is a little too much of a good thing! No human being can stand that sort of thing, Maria Alexandrovna! You must be aware of that fact!"

"My dear friend," replied Maria Alexandrovna—"you will allow me to continue to call you by that name, for you have no better friend than I am!—my friend, you are suffering—you are amazed and bewildered; your heart is sore, and therefore the tone of your remarks to me is perhaps not surprising. But I have made up my mind to open my heart to you, especially as I am, perhaps, in some degree to blame before you. Sit down; let us talk it over!"

Maria Alexandrovna's voice was tender to a sickly extent. Her face showed the pain she was suffering. The amazed Mosgliakoff sat down beside her in the arm-chair.

"You hid somewhere, and listened, I suppose?" she began, looking reproachfully into

his face.

"Yes I did, of course I did; and a good thing too! What a fool I should have looked if I hadn't! At all events now I know what you have been plotting against me!" replied the injured man, rudely; encouraging and supporting himself by his own fury.

"And you—and you—with your principles, and with your bringing up, could condescend to such an action—Oh, oh!"

Mosgliakoff jumped up.

"Maria Alexandrovna, this is a little too much!" he cried. "Consider what you condescend to do, with your principles, and then judge of other people."

"One more question," she continued, without replying to his outburst: "who recommended you to be an eavesdropper; who told you anything; who is the spy here? That's what I wish to know!"

"Oh, excuse me; that I shall not tell you!"

"Very well; I know already. I said, Paul, that I was in some degree to blame before you. But if you look into the matter you will find that if I am to blame it is solely in consequence of my anxiety to do you a good turn!"

"What? a good turn—me? No, no, madam! I assure you I am not to be caught again! I'm not quite such a fool!"

He moved so violently in his arm-chair that it shook again.

"Now, do be cool, if you can, my good friend. Listen to me attentively, and you will find that what I say is only the bare truth. In the first place I was anxious to inform you of all that has just taken place, in which case you would have learned everything, down to the smallest detail, without being obliged to descend to eavesdropping! If I did not tell you all before, it was simply because the whole matter was in an embryo condition in my mind. It was then quite possible that what has happened would never happen. You see, I am quite open with you.

"In the second place, do not blame my daughter. She loves you to distraction; and it was only by the exercise of my utmost influence that I persuaded her to drop you, and accept the prince's offer."

"I have just had the pleasure of receiving convincing proof of her 'love to distraction!'" remarked Mosgliakoff, ironically and bitterly.

"Very well. But how did you speak to her? As a lover should speak? Again, ought any man of respectable position and tone to speak like that? You insulted and wounded her!"

"Never mind about my 'tone' now! All I can say is that this morning, when I went away with the prince, in spite of both of you having been as sweet as honey to me before, you reviled me behind my back like a pickpocket! I know all about it, you see!"

"Yes, from the same dirty source, I suppose?" said Maria Alexandrovna, smiling disdainfully. "Yes, Paul, I did revile you: I pitched into you considerably, and I admit it frankly. But it was simply that I was bound to blacken you before her. Why? Because, as I have said, I required her to consent to leave you, and this consent was so difficult to tear from her! Short-sighted man that you are! If she

had not loved you, why should I have required so to blacken your character? Why should I have been obliged to take this extreme step? Oh! you don't know all! I was forced to use my fullest maternal authority in order to erase you from her heart; and with all my influence and skill I only succeeded in erasing your dear image superficially and partially! If you saw and heard all just now, it cannot have escaped you that Zina did not once, by either word or gesture, encourage or confirm my words to the prince? Throughout the whole scene she said not one word. She sang, but like an automaton! Her whole soul was in anguish, and at last, out of pity for her, I took the prince away. I am sure, she cried, when I left her alone! When you entered the room you must have observed tears in her eyes?"

Mosgliakoff certainly did recall the fact that when he rushed into the room Zina was crying.

"But you—you—why were you so against me, Maria Alexandrovna?" he cried. "Why did you revile me and malign me, as you admit you did?"

"Ah, now that's quite a different question. Now, if you had only asked me reasonably at the beginning, you should have had your answer long ago! Yes, you are right. It was I, and I alone, who did it all. Do not think of Zina in the matter. Now, why did I do it? I reply, in the first place, for Zina's sake. The prince is rich, influential, has great connections, and in marrying him Zina will make a brilliant match. Very well; then if the prince dies—as perhaps he will die soon, for we are all mortal,—Zina is still young, a widow, a princess, and probably very rich. Then she can marry whom she pleases; she may make another brilliant match if she likes. But of course she will marry the man she loves, and loved before, the man whose heart she wounded by accepting the prince. Remorse alone would be enough to make her marry the man whom she had loved and so deeply injured!"

"Hem!" said Paul, gazing at his boots thoughtfully.

"In the second place," continued Maria, "and I will put this shortly, because, though you read a great deal of your beloved Shakespeare, and extract his finest thoughts and ideals, yet you are very young, and cannot, perhaps, apply what you read. You may not understand my feelings in this matter: listen, however. I am giving my Zina to this prince partly for the prince's own sake, because I wish to save him by this marriage. We are old friends; he is the dearest and best of men, he is a knightly, chivalrous gentleman, and he lives helpless and miserable in the claws of that devil of a woman at Donchanovo! Heaven knows that I persuaded Zina into this marriage by putting it to her that she would be performing a great and noble action. I represented her as being the stay and the comfort and the darling and the idol of a poor old man, who probably would not live another year at the most! I showed her that thus his last days should be made happy with love and light and friendship, instead of wretched with fear and the society of a detestable woman. Oh! do not blame Zina. She is guiltless. I am not—I admit it; for if there have been calculations it is I who have made them! But I calculated for her, Paul; for her, not myself! I have outlived my time; I have thought but for my child, and what mother could blame me for this?" Tears sparkled in the fond mother's eyes. Mosgliakoff listened in amazement to all this eloquence, winking his eyes in bewilderment.

"Yes, yes, of course! You talk well, Maria Alexandrovna, but you forget—you gave me your word, you encouraged me, you gave me my hopes; and where am I now? I have to stand aside and look a fool!"

"But, my dear Paul, you don't surely suppose that I have not thought of you too! Don't you see the huge, immeasurable gain to yourself in all this? A gain so vast that I was bound in your interest to act as I did!"

"Gain for me! How so?" asked Paul, in the most abject state of confusion and bewilderment.

"Gracious Heavens! do you mean to say you are really so simple and so short-sighted as to be unable to see that?" cried Maria Alexandrovna, raising her eyes to the ceiling in a pious manner. "Oh! youth, youth! That's what comes of steeping one's soul in Shakespeare! You ask me, my dear friend Paul, where is the gain to you in all this. Allow me to make a little digression. Zina loves you—that is an undoubted fact. But I have observed that at the same time, and in spite of her evident love, she is not quite sure of your good feeling and devotion to her; and for this reason she is sometimes cold and self-restrained in your presence. Have you never observed this yourself, Paul?"

"Certainly; I did this very day; but go on, what do you deduce from that fact?"

"There, you see! you have observed it yourself; then of course I am right. She is not quite sure of the lasting quality of your feeling for her! I am a mother, and I may be permitted to read the heart of my child. Now, then, supposing that instead of rushing into the room and reproaching, vilifying, even swearing at and insulting this sweet, pure, beautiful, proud being, instead of hurling contempt and vituperation at her head—supposing that instead of all this you had received the bad news with composure, with tears of grief, maybe; perhaps even with despair—but at the same time with noble composure of soul—"

"H'm!"

"No, no—don't interrupt me! I wish to show you the picture as it is. Very well, supposing, then, that you had come to her and said, 'Zina, I love you better than my life, but family considerations must separate us; I understand these considerations—they are devised for your greater happiness, and I dare not oppose them. Zina, I forgive you; be happy, if you can!'—think what effect such noble words would have wrought upon her heart!"

"Yes—yes, that's all very true, I quite understand that much! but if I had said all this, I should have had to go all the same, without satisfaction!"

"No, no, no! don't interrupt me! I wish to show you the whole picture in all its detail, in order to impress you fully and satisfactorily. Very well, then, imagine now that you meet her in society some time afterwards: you meet perhaps at a ball—in the brilliant light of a ball-room, under the soothing strains of music, and in the midst of worldly women and of all that is gay and beautiful. You alone are sad—thoughtful—pale,—you lean against some pillar (where you are visible, however!) and watch her. She is dancing. You hear the strains of Strauss, and the wit and merriment around you, but you are sad and wretched.

"What, think you, will Zina make of it? With what sort of eyes will she gaze on you as you stand there? 'And I could doubt this man!' she will think, 'this man who sacrificed all, all, for my sake—even to the mortal wounding of his heart!' Of course the old love will awake in her bosom and will swell with irresistible power!"

Maria Alexandrovna stopped to take breath. Paul moved violently from side to side of his chair.

"Zina now goes abroad for the benefit of the prince's health—to Italy—to Spain," she continued, "where the myrtle and the lemon tree grow, where the sky is so blue, the beautiful Guadalquivir flows! to the land of love, where none can live without loving; where roses and kisses—so to speak—breathe in the very air around. You follow her—you sacrifice your business, friends, everything, and follow her. And so

your love grows and increases with irresistible might. Of course that love is irreproachable—innocent—you will languish for one another—you will meet frequently; of course others will malign and vilify you both, and call your love by baser names—but your love is innocent, as I have purposely said; I am her mother—it is not for me to teach you evil, but good. At all events the prince is not in the condition to keep a very sharp look-out upon you; but if he did, as if there would be the slightest ground for base suspicion? Well, the prince dies at last, and then, who will marry Zina, if not yourself? You are so distant a relative of the prince's that there could be no obstacle to the match; you marry her—she is young still, and rich. You are a grandee in an instant! you, too, are rich now! I will take care that the prince's will is made as it should be; and lastly, Zina, now convinced of your loyalty and faithfulness, will look on you hereafter as her hero, as her paragon of virtue and self-sacrifice! Oh! you must be blind,—blind, not to observe and calculate your own profit when it lies but a couple of strides from you, grinning at you, as it were, and saying, 'Here, I am yours, take me! Oh, Paul, Paul!'"

"Maria Alexandrovna!" cried Mosgliakoff, in great agitation and excitement, "I see it all! I have been rude, and a fool, and a scoundrel too!" He jumped up from his chair and tore his hair.

"Yes, and unbusinesslike, that's the chief thing—unbusinesslike, and blindly so!" added Maria Alexandrovna.

"I'm an ass! Maria Alexandrovna," he cried in despair. "All is lost now, and I loved her to madness!"

"Maybe all is not lost yet!" said this successful orator softly, and as though thinking out some idea.

"Oh! if only it could be so! help me—teach me. Oh! save me, save me!"

Mosgliakoff burst into tears.

"My dear boy," said Maria Alexandrovna, sympathetically, and holding out her hand, "you acted impulsively, from the depth and heat of your passion—in fact, out of your great love for her; you were in despair, you had forgotten yourself; she must understand all that!"

"Oh! I love her madly! I am ready to sacrifice everything for her!" cried Mosgliakoff.

"Listen! I will justify you before her."

"Oh, Maria Alexandrovna!"

"Yes, I will. I take it upon myself! You come with me, and you shall tell her exactly what I said!"

"Oh, how kind, how good you are! Can't we go at once, Maria Alexandrovna?"

"Goodness gracious, no! What a very green hand you are, Paul! She's far too proud! she would take it as a new rudeness and impertinence! To-morrow I shall arrange it all comfortably for you: but now, couldn't you get out of the way somewhere for a while, to that godfather of yours, for instance? You could come back in the evening, if you pleased; but my advice would be to stay away!"

"Yes, yes! I'll go—of course! Good heavens, you've made a man of me again!—Well, but look here—one more question:—What if the prince does not die so soon?"

"Oh, my dear boy, how delightfully naïve you are! On the contrary, we must pray for his good health! We must wish with all our hearts for long life to this dear, good, and chivalrous old man! I shall be the first to pray day and night for the happiness of my beloved daughter! But alas! I fear the prince's case is hopeless; you see, they must visit the capital now, to bring Zina out into society.—I dreadfully fear that all this may prove fatal to him; however, we'll pray, Paul, we can't do more, and the rest is in the hands of a kind Providence. You see what I mean? Very well—good-bye, my dear boy, bless you! Be a man, and wait patiently—be a man, that's the chief thing! I never doubted your generosity of character; but be brave—good-bye!" She pressed his hand warmly, and Mosgliakoff walked out of the room on tip-toes.

"There goes one fool, got rid of satisfactorily!" observed Maria Alexandrovna to herself,—“but there are more behind—!”

At this moment the door opened, and Zina entered the room. She was paler than usual, and her eyes were all ablaze.

"Mamma!" she said, "be quick about this business, or I shall not be able to hold out. It is all so dirty and mean that I feel I must run out of the house if it goes on. Don't drive me to desperation! I warn you—don't weary me out—don't weary me out!"

"Zina—what is it, my darling? You—you've been listening?" cried Maria Alexandrovna, gazing intently and anxiously at her daughter.

"Yes, I have; but you need not try to make me ashamed of myself as you succeeded in doing with that fool. Now listen: I solemnly swear that if you worry and annoy me by making me play various mean and odious parts in this comedy of yours,—I swear to you that I will throw up the whole business and put an end to it in a moment. It is quite enough that I have consented to be a party in the main and essence of the base transactions; but—but—I did not know myself, I am poisoned and suffocated with the stench of it!"—So saying, she left the room and banged the door after her.

Maria Alexandrovna looked fixedly after her for a moment, and reflected.

"I must make haste," she cried, rousing herself; "she is the greatest danger and difficulty of all! If these detestable people do not let us alone, instead of acting the town-criers all over the place (as I fear they are doing already!)—all will be lost! She won't stand the worry of it—she'll drop the business altogether!—At all hazards, I must get the prince to the country house, and that quickly, too! I shall be off there at once, first, and bring my fool of a husband up: he shall be made useful for once in his life! Meanwhile the prince shall have his sleep out, and when he wakes up I shall be back and ready to cart him away bodily!"

She rang the bell.

"Are the horses ready?" she inquired of the man.

"Yes, madam, long ago!" said the latter.

She had ordered the carriage the moment after she had taken the prince upstairs.

Maria Alexandrovna dressed hurriedly, and then looked in at Zina's room for a moment, before starting, in order to tell her the outlines of her plan of operations, and at the same time to give Zina a few necessary instructions. But her daughter could not listen to her. She was lying on her bed with face hidden in the pillows, crying, and was tearing her beautiful hair with her long white hands:

occasionally she trembled violently for a moment, as though a blast of cold had passed through all her veins. Her mother began to speak to her, but Zina did not even raise her head!

Having stood over her daughter in a state of bewilderment for some little while, Maria Alexandrovna left the room; and to make up for lost time bade the coachman drive like fury, as she stepped into the carriage.

"I don't quite like Zina having listened!" she thought as she rattled away. "I gave Mosgliakoff very much the same argument as to herself: she is proud, and may easily have taken offence! H'm! Well, the great thing is to be in time with all the arrangements,—before people know what I am up to! Good heavens, fancy, if my fool of a husband were to be out!!"

And at the very thought of such a thing, Maria Alexandrovna's rage so overcame her that it was clear her poor husband would fare badly for his sins if he proved to be not at home! She twisted and turned in her place with impatience,—the horses almost galloped with the carriage at their heels.

CHAPTER X.

On they flew.

I have said already that this very day, on her first drive after the prince, Maria Alexandrovna had been inspired with a great idea! and I promised to reveal this idea in its proper place. But I am sure the reader has guessed it already!—It was, to "confiscate" the prince in her turn, and carry him off to the village where, at this moment, her husband Afanassy Matveyevitch vegetated alone.

I must admit that our heroine was growing more and more anxious as the day went on; but this is often the case with heroes of all kinds, just before they attain their great ends! Some such instinct whispered to her that it was not safe to remain in Mordasoff another hour, if it could be avoided;—but once in the country house, the whole town might go mad and stand on its head, for all she cared!

Of course she must not lose time, even there! All sorts of things might happen—even the police might interfere. (Reader, I shall never believe, for my part, that my heroine really had the slightest fear of the vulgar police force; but as it has been rumoured in Mordasoff that at this moment such a thought did pass through her brain, why, I must record the fact.)

In a word she saw clearly that Zina's marriage with the prince must be brought about at once, without delay! It was easily done: the priest at the village should perform the ceremony; why not the day after to-morrow? or indeed, in case of need, to-morrow? Marriages had often been brought about in less time than this—in two hours, she had heard! It would be easy enough to persuade the prince that haste and simplicity would be in far better taste than all the usual pomps and vanities of common everyday weddings. In fact, she relied upon her skill in putting the matter to the old man as a fitting dramatic issue to a romantic story of love, and thus to touch the most sensitive string of his chivalrous heart.

In case of absolute need there was always the possibility of making him drunk, or rather of keeping him perpetually drunk. And then, come what might, Zina would be a princess! And if this marriage were fated to produce scandal among the prince's relations and friends in St. Petersburg and Moscow, Maria Alexandrovna comforted herself with the reflection that marriages in high life nearly always were productive of scandal; and that such a result might fairly be looked upon as "good form," and as peculiar to aristocratic circles.

Besides, she felt sure that Zina need only show herself in society, with her mamma to support her, and every one of all those countesses and princes should very soon either acknowledge her of their own accord, or yield to the head-washing that Maria Alexandrovna felt herself so competent to give to any or all of them, individually or collectively.

It was in consequence of these reflections that Maria Alexandrovna was now hastening with all speed towards her village, in order to bring back Afanassy Matveyevitch, whose presence she considered absolutely necessary at this crisis. It was desirable that her husband should appear and invite the prince down to the country: she relied upon the appearance of the father of the family, in dress-coat and white tie, hastening up to town on the first rumours of the prince's arrival there, to produce a very favourable impression upon the old man's self-respect: it would flatter him; and after such a courteous action, followed by a polite and warmly-couched invitation to the country, the prince would hardly refuse to go.

At last the carriage stopped at the door of a long low wooden house, surrounded by old lime trees. This was the country house, Maria Alexandrovna's village residence.

Lights were burning inside.

"Where's my old fool?" cried Maria Alexandrovna bursting like a hurricane into the sitting-room.

"Whats this towel lying here for?—Oh!—he's been wiping his head, has he. What, the baths again! and tea—of course tea!—always tea! Well, what are you winking your eyes at me for, you old fool?—Here, why is his hair not cropped? Grisha, Grisha!—here; why didn't you cut your master's hair, as I told you?"

Maria Alexandrovna, on entering the room, had intended to greet her husband more kindly than this; but seeing that he had just been to the baths and that he was drinking tea with great satisfaction, as usual, she could not restrain her irritable feelings.

She felt the contrast between her own activity and intellectual energy, and the stolid indifference and sheep-like contentedness of her husband, and it went to her heart!

Meanwhile the "old fool," or to put it more politely, he who had been addressed by that title, sat at the tea-urn, and stared with open mouth, in abject alarm, opening and shutting his lips as he gazed at the wife of his bosom, who had almost petrified him by her sudden appearance.

At the door stood the sleepy, fat Grisha, looking on at the scene, and blinking both eyes at periodical intervals.

"I couldn't cut his hair as you wished, because he wouldn't let me!" he growled at last. "'You'd better let me do it!'—I said, 'or the mistress'll be down one of these days, and then we shall both catch it!'"

"No," he says, "I want it like this now, and you shall cut it on Sunday. I like it long!"

"What!—So you wish to curl it without my leave, do you! What an idea—as if you could wear curls with your sheep-face underneath! Good gracious, what a mess you've made of the place; and what's the smell—what have you been doing, idiot, eh!" cried Maria Alexandrovna, waxing more and more angry, and turning furiously upon the wretched and perfectly innocent Afanassy!

"Mam-mammy!" muttered the poor frightened master of the house, gazing with frightened eyes at the mistress, and blinking with all his might—"mammy!"

"How many times have I dinned into your stupid head that I am not your 'mammy.' How can I be your mammy, you idiotic pigmy? How dare you call a noble lady by such a name; a lady whose proper place is in the highest circles, not beside an ass like yourself!"

"Yes—yes,—but—but, you are my legal wife, you know, after all;—so I—it was husbandly affection you know—" murmured poor Afanassy, raising both hands to his head as he spoke, to defend his hair from the tugs he evidently expected.

"Oh, idiot that you are! did anyone ever hear such a ridiculous answer as that—legal wife, indeed! Who ever heard the expression 'legal wife,' in good society—nasty low expression! And how dare you remind me that I am your wife, when I use all my power and do all I possibly can at every moment to forget the fact, eh? What are you covering your head with your hands for? Look at his hair—now: wet, as wet as reeds! it will take three hours to dry that head! How on earth am I to take him like this? How can he show his face among respectable people? What am I to do?"

And Maria Alexandrovna bit her finger-nails with rage as she walked furiously up and down the room.

It was no very great matter, of course; and one that was easily set right; but Maria Alexandrovna required a vent for her feelings and felt the need of emptying out her accumulated wrath upon the head of the wretched Afanassy Matveyevitch; for tyranny is a habit recallable at need.

Besides, everyone knows how great a contrast there is between the sweetness and refinement shown by many ladies of a certain class on the stage, as it were, of society life, and the revelations of character behind the scenes at home; and I was anxious to bring out this contrast for my reader's benefit.

Afanassy watched the movements of his terrible spouse in fear and trembling; perspiration formed upon his brow as he gazed.

"Grisha!" she cried at last, "dress your master this instant! Dress-coat, black trousers, white waistcoat and tie, quick! Where's his hairbrush—quick, quick!"

"Mam-my! Why, I've just been to the bath. I shall catch cold if I go up to town just now!"

"You won't catch cold!"

"But—mammy, my hair's quite wet!"

"We'll dry it in a minute. Here, Grisha, take this brush and brush away till he's dry,—harder—harder—much harder! There, that's better!"

Grisha worked like a man. For the greater convenience of his herculean task he seized his master's shoulder with one hand as he rubbed violently with the other. Poor Afanassy grunted and groaned and almost wept.

"Now, then, lift him up a bit. Where's the pomatum? Bend your head, duffer!—bend lower, you abject dummy!" And Maria Alexandrovna herself undertook to pomade her husband's hair, ploughing her hands through it without the slightest pity. Afanassy heartily wished that his shock growth had been cut. He winced, and groaned and moaned, but did not cry out under the painful operation.

"You suck my life-blood out of me—bend lower, you idiot!" remarked the fond wife —"bend lower still, I tell you!"

"How have I sucked your life blood?" asked the victim, bending his head as low as circumstances permitted.

"Fool!—allegorically, of course—can't you understand? Now, then, comb it yourself. Here, Grisha, dress him, quick!"

Our heroine threw herself into an arm-chair, and critically watched the ceremony of adorning her husband. Meanwhile the latter had a little opportunity to get his breath once more and compose his feelings generally; so that when matters arrived at the point where the tie is tied, he had even developed so much audacity as to express opinions of his own as to how the bow should be manufactured.

At last, having put his dress-coat on, the lord of the manor was his brave self again, and gazed at his highly ornate person in the glass with great satisfaction and complacency.

"Where are you going to take me to?" he now asked, smiling at his reflected self.

Maria Alexandrovna could not believe her ears.

"What—what? How dare you ask me where I am taking you to, sir!"

"But—mammy—I must know, you know—"

"Hold your tongue! You let me hear you call me mammy again, especially where we are going to now! you sha'n't have any tea for a month!"

The frightened consort held his peace.

"Look at that, now! You haven't got a single 'order' to put on—sloven!" she continued, looking at his black coat with contempt.

"The Government awards orders, mammy; and I am not a sloven, but a town councillor!" said Afanassy, with a sudden excess of noble wrath.

"What, what—what! So you've learned to argue now, have you—you mongrel, you? However, I haven't time to waste over you now, or I'd—but I sha'n't forget it. Here, Grisha, give him his fur coat and his hat—quick; and look here, Grisha, when I'm gone, get these three rooms ready, and the green room, and the corner bedroom. Quick—find your broom; take the coverings off the looking-glasses and clocks, and see that all is ready and tidy within an hour. Put on a dress coat, and see that the other men have gloves: don't lose time. Quick, now!"

She entered the carriage, followed by Afanassy. The latter sat bewildered and lost.

Meanwhile Maria Alexandrovna reflected as to how best she could drum into her husband's thick skull certain essential instructions with regard to the present situation of affairs. But Afanassy anticipated her.

"I had a very original dream to-day, Maria Alexandrovna," he observed quite unexpectedly, in the middle of a long silence.

"Tfu! idiot. I thought you were going to say something of terrific interest, from the look of you. Dream, indeed! How dare you mention your miserable dreams to me! Original, too! Listen here: if you dare so much as remind me of the word 'dream,' or say anything else, either, where we are going to-day, I—I don't know what I

won't do to you! Now, look here: Prince K. has arrived at my house. Do you remember Prince K.?"

"Oh, yes, mammy, I remember; and why has he done us this honour?"

"Be quiet; that's not your business. Now, you are to invite him, with all the amiability you can, to come down to our house in the country, at once! That is what I am taking you up for. And if you dare so much as breathe another word of any kind, either to-day or to-morrow, or next day, without leave from me, you shall herd geese for a whole year. You're not to say a single word, mind! and that's all you have to think of. Do you understand, now?"

"Well, but if I'm asked anything?"

"Hold your tongue all the same!"

"Oh, but I can't do that—I can't do—"

"Very well, then; you can say 'H'm,' or something of that sort, to give them the idea that you are very wise indeed, and like to think well before answering."

"H'm."

"Understand me, now. I am taking you up because you are to make it appear that you have just heard of the prince's visit, and have hastened up to town in a transport of joy to express your unbounded respect and gratitude to him, and to invite him at once to your country house! Do you understand me?"

"H'm."

"I don't want you to say 'H'm' now, you fool! You must answer me when I speak!"

"All right—all right, mammy. All shall be as you wish; but why am I to ask the prince down?"

"What—what! arguing again. What business is it of yours why you are to invite him? How dare you ask questions!"

"Why it's all the same thing, mammy. How am I to invite him if I must not say a word?"

"Oh, I shall do all the talking. All you have to do is to bow. Do you hear? Bow; and hold your hat in your hand and look polite. Do you understand, or not?"

"I understand, mam—Maria-Alexandrovna."

"The prince is very witty, indeed; so mind, if he says anything either to yourself or anyone else, you are to laugh cordially and merrily. Do you hear me?"

"H'm."

"Don't say 'H'm' to me, I tell you. You are to answer me plainly and simply. Do you hear me, or not?"

"Yes, yes; I hear you, of course. That's all right. I only say 'H'm,' for practice; I want to get into the way of saying it. But look here, mammy, it's all very well; you say I'm not to speak, and if he speaks to me I'm to look at him and laugh—but what if he asks me a question?"

"Oh—you dense log of a man! I tell you again, you are to be quiet. I'll answer for you. You have simply got to look polite, and smile!"

"But he'll think I am dumb!" said Afanassy.

"Well, and what if he does. Let him! You'll conceal the fact that you are a fool, anyhow!"

"H'm, and if other people ask me questions?"

"No one will; there'll be no one to ask you. But if there should be anyone else in the room, and they ask you questions, all you have to do is to smile sarcastically. Do you know what a sarcastic smile is?"

"What, a witty sort of smile, is it, mammy?"

"I'll let you know about it! Witty, indeed! Why, who would think of expecting anything witty from a fool like you. No, sir, a jesting smile—jesting and contemptuous!"

"H'm."

"Good heavens. I'm afraid for this idiot," thought Maria Alexandrovna to herself. "I really think it would have been almost better to leave him behind, after all." So thinking, nervous and anxious, Maria Alexandrovna drove on. She looked out of the window, and she fidgeted, and she bustled the coachman up. The horses were almost flying through the air; but to her they appeared to be crawling. Afanassy sat silent and thoughtful in the corner of the carriage, practising his lessons. At last the carriage arrived at the town house.

Hardly, however, had Maria Alexandrovna mounted the outer steps when she became aware of a fine pair of horses trotting up—drawing a smart sledge with a hood to it. In fact, the very "turn-out" in which Anna Nicolaevna Antipova was generally to be seen.

Two ladies sat in the sledge. One of these was, of course, Mrs. Antipova herself; the other was Natalia Dimitrievna, of late the great friend and ally of the former lady.

Maria Alexandrovna's heart sank.

But she had no time to say a word, before another smart vehicle drove up, in which there reclined yet another guest. Exclamations of joy and delight were now heard.

"Maria Alexandrovna! and Afanassy Matveyevitch! Just arrived, too! Where from? How extremely delightful! And here we are, you see, just driven up at the right moment. We are going to spend the evening with you. What a delightful surprise."

The guests alighted and fluttered up the steps like so many swallows.

Maria Alexandrovna could neither believe her eyes nor her ears.

"Curse you all!" she said to herself. "This looks like a plot—it must be seen to; but it takes more than a flight of magpies like you to get to windward of me. Wait a little!!"

CHAPTER XI.

Mosgliakoff went out from Maria Alexandrovna's house to all appearances quite

pacified. She had fired his ardour completely. His imagination was kindled.

He did not go to his godfather's, for he felt the need of solitude. A terrific rush of heroic and romantic thoughts surged over him, and gave him no rest.

He pictured to himself the solemn explanation he should have with Zina, then the generous throbs of his all-forgiving heart; his pallor and despair at the future ball in St. Petersburg; then Spain, the Guadalquivir, and love, and the old dying prince joining their hands with his last blessing. Then came thoughts of his beautiful wife, devoted to himself, and never ceasing to wonder at and admire her husband's heroism and exalted refinement of taste and conduct. Then, among other things, the attention which he should attract among the ladies of the highest circles, into which he would of course enter, thanks to his marriage with Zina—widow of the Prince K.: then the inevitable appointments, first as a vice-governor, with the delightful accompaniment of salary: in a word, all, all that Maria Alexandrovna's eloquence had pictured to his imagination, now marched in triumphant procession through his brain, soothing and attracting and flattering his self-love.

And yet—(I really cannot explain this phenomenon, however!)—and yet, no sooner did the first flush of this delightful sunrise of future delights pass off and fade away, than the annoying thought struck him: this is all very well, but it is in the future: and now, to-day, I shall look a dreadful fool. As he reflected thus, he looked up and found that he had wandered a long way, to some of the dirty back slums of the town. A wet snow was falling; now and again he met another belated pedestrian like himself. The outer circumstances began to anger Mosgliakoff, which was a bad sign; for when things are going well with us we are always inclined to see everything in a rose-coloured light.

Paul could not help remembering that up to now he had been in the habit of cutting a dash at Mordasoff. He had enjoyed being treated at all the houses he went to in the town, as Zina's accepted lover, and to be congratulated, as he often was, upon the honour of that distinction. He was proud of being her future husband; and here he was now with notice to quit. He would be laughed at. He couldn't tell everybody about the future scene in the ball-room at St. Petersburg, and the Guadalquivir, and all that! And then a thought came out into prominence, which had been uncomfortably fidgeting about in his brain for some time: "Was it all true? Would it really come about as Maria Alexandrovna had predicted?"

Here it struck him that Maria Alexandrovna was an amazingly cunning woman; that, however worthy she might be of universal esteem, still she was a known scandal-monger, and lied from morning to night! that, again, she probably had some good reason for wishing him out of the place to-night. He next bethought him of Zina, and of her parting look at him, which was very far from being expressive of passionate love; he remembered also, that, less than an hour ago she had called him a fool.

As he thought of the last fact Paul stopped in his tracks, as though shot; blushed, and almost cried for very shame! At this very moment he was unfortunate enough to lose his footing on the slippery pavement, and to go head-first into a snow-heap. As he stood shaking himself dry, a whole troop of dogs, which had long trotted barking at his heels, flew at him. One of them, a wretched little half-starved beast, went so far as to fix her teeth into his fur coat and hang therefrom. Swearing and striking out, Paul cleared his way out of the yelping pack at last, in a fury, and with rent clothes; and making his way as fast as he could to the corner of the street, discovered that he hadn't the slightest idea where he was. He walked up lanes, and down streets, and round corners, and lost himself more and more hopelessly; also his temper. "The devil take all these confounded exalted ideas!" he growled, half aloud; "and the archfiend take every one of you, you and your Guadalquivers and humbug!"

Mosgliakoff was not in a pretty humour at this moment.

At last, tired and horribly angry, after two hours of walking, he reached the door of Maria Alexandrovna's house.

Observing a host of carriages standing outside, he paused to consider.

"Surely she has not a party to-night!" he thought, "and if she has, why has she a party?"

He inquired of the servants, and found out that Maria Alexandrovna had been out of town, and had fetched up Afanassy Matveyevitch, gorgeous in his dress-suit and white tie. He learned, further, that the prince was awake, but had not as yet made his appearance in the "salon."

On receiving this information, Paul Mosgliakoff said not a word, but quietly made his way upstairs to his uncle's room.

He was in that frame of mind in which a man determines to commit some desperate act, out of revenge, aware at the time, and wide awake to the fact that he is about to do the deed, but forgetting entirely that he may very likely regret it all his life afterwards!

Entering the prince's room, he found that worthy seated before the glass, with a perfectly bare head, but with whiskers and napoleon stuck on. His wig was in the hands of his old and grey valet, his favourite Ivan Pochomitch, and the latter was gravely and thoughtfully combing it out.

As for the prince, he was indeed a pitiable object! He was not half awake yet, for one thing; he sat as though he were still dazed with sleep; he kept opening and shutting his mouth, and stared at Mosgliakoff as though he did not know him!

"Well, how are you, uncle?" asked Mosgliakoff.

"What, it's you, is it!" said the prince. "Ye—yes; I've been as—leep a little while! Oh, heavens!" he cried suddenly, with great animation, "why, I've got no wig on!"

"Oh, never mind that, uncle; I'll help you on with it, if you like!"

"Dear me; now you've found out my se—cret! I told him to shut the door. Now, my friend, you must give me your word in—stantly, that you'll never breathe a hint of this to anyone—I mean about my hair being ar—tificial!"

"Oh, uncle! As if I could be guilty of such meanness?" cried Paul, who was anxious to please the prince, for reasons of his own.

"Ye—yes, ye—yes. Well, as I see you are a good fe—llow, I—I'll just as—tonish you a little: I'll tell you all my secrets! How do you like my mous—tache, my dear boy?"

"Wonderful, uncle, wonderful! It astonishes me that you should have been able to keep it so long!"

"Sp—are your wonder, my friend, it's ar—tificial!"

"No!! That's difficult to believe! Well, and your whiskers, uncle! admit—you black them, now don't you?"

"Black them? Not—only I don't black them, but they, too, are ar—tificial!" said the Prince, regarding Mosgliakoff with a look of triumph.

"What! Artificial? No, no, uncle! I can't believe that! You're laughing at me!"

"Parole d'honneur, mon ami!" cried the delighted old man; "and fancy, all—everybody is taken in by them just as you were! Even Stepanida Matveyevna cannot believe they are not real, sometimes, although she often sticks them on herself! But, I am sure, my dear friend, you will keep my se—cret. Give me your word!"

"I do give you my word, uncle! But surely you do not suppose I would be so mean as to divulge it?"

"Oh, my boy! I had such a fall to-day, without you. The coachman upset me out of the carriage again!"

"How? When?"

"Why, we were driving to the mo—nastery, when?—"

"I know, uncle: that was early this morning!"

"No, no! A couple of hours ago, not more! I was driving along with him, and he suddenly took and up—set me!"

"Why, my dear uncle, you were asleep," began Paul, in amazement!

"Ye—yes, ye—yes. I did have a sleep; and then I drove away, at least I—at least I—dear me, how strange it all seems!"

"I assure you, uncle, you have been dreaming! You saw all this in a dream! You have been sleeping quietly here since just after dinner!"

"No!" And the prince reflected. "Ye—yes. Perhaps I did see it all in a dream! However, I can remember all I saw quite well. First, I saw a large bull with horns; and then I saw a pro—curor, and I think he had huge horns too. Then there was Napoleon Buonaparte. Did you ever hear, my boy, that people say I am so like Napoleon Buonaparte? But my profile is very like some old pope. What do you think about it, my bo—oy?"

"I think you are much more like Napoleon Buonaparte, uncle!"

"Why, ye—yes, of course—full face; so I am, my boy, so I am! I dreamt of him on his is—land, and do you know he was such a merry, talk—ative fellow, he quite am—used me!"

"Who, uncle—Napoleon?" asked Mosgliakoff, looking thoughtfully at the old man. A strange idea was beginning to occupy his brain—an idea which he could not quite put into shape as yet.

"Ye—yes, ye—yes, Nap—oleon. We talked about philosophical subjects. And do you know, my boy, I became quite sorry that the English had been so hard upon him. Of course, though, if one didn't chain him up, he would be flying at people's throats again! Still I'm sorry for him. Now I should have managed him quite differently. I should have put him on an uninhabited island."

"Why uninhabited, uncle?" asked Mosgliakoff, absently.

"Well, well, an inhabited one, then; but the in-habitants must be good sort of people. And I should arrange all sorts of amusements for him, at the State's charge: theatres, balle's, and so on. And, of course, he should walk about, under proper su-pervision. Then he should have tarts (he liked tarts, you know), as many tarts as ever he pleased. I should treat him like a fa-a-ther; and he would end by being sorry for his sins, see if he wouldn't!"

Mosgliakoff listened absently to all this senile gabble, and bit his nails with impatience. He was anxious to turn the conversation on to the subject of marriage. He did not know quite clearly why he wished to do so, but his heart was boiling over with anger.

Suddenly the old man made an exclamation of surprise.

"Why, my dear boy, I declare I've forgotten to tell you about it. Fancy, I made an offer of marriage to-day!"

"An offer of marriage, uncle?" cried Paul, brightening up.

"Why, ye-yes! an offer. Pachomief, are you going? All right! Away with you! Ye-yes, c'est une charmante personne. But I confess, I took the step rather rash-ly. I only begin to see that now. Dear me! dear, dear me!"

"Excuse me, uncle; but when did you make this offer?"

"Well, I admit I don't know exactly when I made it! Perhaps I dre-dreamed it; I don't know. Dear me, how very strange it all seems!"

Mosgliakoff trembled with joy: his new idea blazed forth in full developed glory.

"And whom did you propose to?" he asked impatiently.

"The daughter of the house, my boy; that beau-tiful girl. I-I forget what they call her. Bu-but, my dear boy, you see I-I can't possibly marry. What am I to do?"

"Oh! of course, you are done for if you marry, that's clear. But let me ask you one more question, uncle. Are you perfectly certain that you actually made her an offer of marriage?"

"Ye-yes, I'm sure of it; I-I—."

"And what if you dreamed the whole thing, just as you did that you were upset out of the carriage a second time?"

"Dear me! dear me! I-I really think I may have dreamed it; it's very awkward. I don't know how to show myself there, now. H-how could I find out, dear boy, for certain? Couldn't I get to know by some outside way whether I really did make her an offer of ma-arriage or not? Why, just you think of my dreadful po-sition!"

"Do you know, uncle, I don't think we need trouble ourselves to find out at all."

"Why, wh-what then?"

"I am convinced that you were dreaming."

"I-I think so myself, too, my dear fellow; es-pecially as I often have that sort of dream."

"You see, uncle, you had a drop of wine for lunch, and then another drop or two for

dinner, don't you know; and so you may easily have—”

“Ye—yes, quite so, quite so; it may easily have been that.”

“Besides, my dear uncle, however excited you may have been, you would never have taken such a senseless step in your waking moments. So far as I know you, uncle, you are a man of the highest and most deliberate judgment, and I am positive that —”

“Ye—yes, ye—yes.”

“Why, only imagine—if your relations were to get to hear of such a thing. My goodness, uncle! they were cruel enough to you before. What do you suppose they would do now, eh?”

“Goodness gracious!” cried the frightened old prince. “Good—ness gracious! Wh—why, what would they do, do you think?”

“Do? Why, of course, they would all screech out that you had acted under the influence of insanity: in fact, that you were mad; that you had been swindled, and that you must be put under proper restraint. In fact, they'd pop you into some lunatic asylum.”

Mosgliakoff was well aware of the best method of frightening the poor old man out of his wits.

“Gracious heavens!” cried the latter, trembling like a leaflet with horror. “Gracious heavens! would they really do that?”

“Undoubtedly; and, knowing this, uncle, think for yourself. Could you possibly have done such a thing with your eyes open? As if you don't understand what's good for you just as well as your neighbours. I solemnly affirm that you saw all this in a dream!”

“Of course, of course; un—doubtedly in a dream, un—doubtedly so! What a clever fellow you are, my dear boy; you saw it at once. I am deeply grate—ful to you for putting me right. I was really quite under the im—pression I had actually done it.”

“And how glad I am that I met you, uncle, before you went in there! Just fancy, what a mess you might have made of it! You might have gone in thinking you were engaged to the girl, and behaved in the capacity of accepted lover. Think how fearfully dangerous—.”

“Ye—yes, of course; most dangerous!”

“Why, remember, this girl is twenty-three years old. Nobody will marry her, and suddenly you, a rich and eminent man of rank and title, appear on the scene as her accepted swain. They would lay hold of the idea at once, and act up to it, and swear that you really were her future husband, and would marry you off, too. I daresay they would even count upon your speedy death, and make their calculations accordingly.”

“No!”

“Then again, uncle; a man of your dignity—”

“Ye—yes, quite so, dig—nity!”

“And wisdom,—and amiability—”

"Quite so; wis-dom-wisdom!"

"And then—a prince into the bargain! Good gracious, uncle, as if a man like yourself would make such a match as that, if you really did mean marrying! What would your relations say?"

"Why, my dear boy, they'd simply ea-eat me up,—I—I know their cunning and malice of old! My dear fellow—you won't believe it—but I assure you I was afraid they were going to put me into a lun-atic asylum! a common ma-ad-house! Goodness me, think of that! Whatever should I have done with myself all day in a ma-ad-house?"

"Of course, of course! Well, I won't leave your side, then, uncle, when you go downstairs. There are guests there too!"

"Guests? dear me! I—I—"

"Don't be afraid, uncle; I shall be by you!"

"I—I'm so much obliged to you, my dear boy; you have simply sa-ved me, you have indeed! But, do you know what,—I think I'd better go away altogether!"

"To-morrow, uncle! to-morrow morning at seven! and this evening you must be sure to say, in the presence of everybody, that you are starting away at seven next morning: you must say good-bye to-night!"

"Un-doubtedly, undoubtedly—I shall go;—but what if they talk to me as though I were engaged to the young wo-oman?"

"Don't you fear, uncle! I shall be there! And mind, whatever they say or hint to you, you must declare that you dreamed the whole thing—as indeed you did, of course?"

"Ye—yes, quite so, un-doubtedly so! But, do you know my dear boy, it was a most be-witching dream, for all that! She is a wond-erfully lovely girl, my boy,—such a figure—bewitching—be-witching!"

"Well, au revoir, uncle! I'm going down, now, and you—"

"How! How! you are not going to leave me alone?" cried the old man, greatly alarmed.

"No, no—oh no, uncle; but we must enter the room separately. First, I will go in, and then you come down; that will be better!"

"Very well, very well. Besides, I just want to note down one little i-dea—"

"Capital, uncle! jot it down, and then come at once; don't wait any longer; and to-morrow morning—"

"And to-morrow morning away we go to the Her-mitage, straight to the Her-mitage! Charming—charm-ing! but, do you know, my boy,—she's a fas-cinating girl—she is indeed! be-witching! Such a bust! and, really, if I were to marry, I—I—really—"

"No, no, uncle! Heaven forbid!"

"Yes—yes—quite so—Heaven for-bid!—well, au revoir, my friend—I'll come directly; by the bye—I meant to ask you, have you read Kazanoff's Memoirs?"

"Yes, uncle. Why?"

"Yes, yes, quite so—I forget what I wanted to say—"

"You'll remember afterwards, uncle! au revoir!"

"Au revoir, my boy, au revoir—but, I say, it was a bewitching dream, a most bewitching dream!"

CHAPTER XII.

"Here we all are, all of us, come to spend the evening; Proskovia Ilinishna is coming too, and Luisa Karlovna and all!" cried Mrs. Antipova as she entered the salon, and looked hungrily round. She was a neat, pretty little woman! she was well-dressed, and knew it.

She looked greedily around, as I say, because she had an idea that the prince and Zina were hidden together somewhere about the room.

"Yes, and Katerina Petrovna, and Felisata Michaelovna are coming as well," added Natalia Dimitrievna, a huge woman—whose figure had pleased the prince so much, and who looked more like a grenadier than anything else. This monster had been hand and glove with little Mrs. Antipova for the last three weeks; they were now quite inseparable. Natalia looked as though she could pick her little friend up and swallow her, bones and all, without thinking.

"I need not say with what rapture I welcome you both to my house, and for a whole evening, too!" piped Maria Alexandrovna, a little recovered from her first shock of amazement; "but do tell me, what miracle is it that has brought you all to-day, when I had quite despaired of ever seeing anyone of you in my house again?"

"Oh, oh! my dear Maria Alexandrovna!" said Natalia, very affectedly, but sweetly. The attributes of sweetness and affectation were a curious contrast to her personal appearance.

"You see, dearest Maria Alexandrovna," chirped Mrs. Antipova, "we really must get on with the private theatricals question! It was only this very day that Peter Michaelovitch was saying how bad it was of us to have made no progress towards rehearsing, and so on; and that it was quite time we brought all our silly squabbles to an end! Well, four of us got together to-day, and then it struck us 'Let's all go to Maria Alexandrovna's, and settle the matter once for all!' So Natalia Dimitrievna let all the rest know that we were to meet here! We'll soon settle it—I don't think we should allow it to be said that we do nothing but 'squabble' over the preliminaries and get no farther, do you, dear Maria Alexandrovna?" She added, playfully, and kissing our heroine affectionately, "Goodness me, Zenaida, I declare you grow prettier every day!" And she betook herself to embracing Zina with equal affection.

"She has nothing else to do, but sit and grow more and more beautiful!" said Natalia with great sweetness, rubbing her huge hands together.

"Oh, the devil take them all! they know I care nothing about private theatricals—cursed magpies!" reflected Maria Alexandrovna, beside herself with rage.

"Especially, dear, as that delightful prince is with you just now. You know there is a private theatre in his house at Donchanof, and we have discovered that somewhere or other there, there are a lot of old theatrical properties and decorations and scenery. The prince was at my house to-day, but I was so surprised to see him that it all went clean out of my head and I forgot to ask him. Now we'll

broach the subject before him. You must support me and we'll persuade him to send us all the old rubbish that can be found. We want to get the prince to come and see the play, too! He is sure to subscribe, isn't he—as it is for the poor? Perhaps he would even take a part; he is such a dear, kind, willing old man. If only he did, it would make the fortune of our play!”

“Of course he will take a part! why, he can be made to play any part!” remarked Natalia significantly.

Mrs. Antipova had not exaggerated. Guests poured in every moment! Maria Alexandrovna hardly had time to receive one lot and make the usual exclamations of surprise and delight exacted by the laws of etiquette before another arrival would be announced.

I will not undertake to describe all these good people. I will only remark that every one of them, on arrival, looked about her cunningly; and that every face wore an expression of expectation and impatience.

Some of them came with the distinct intention of witnessing some scene of a delightfully scandalous nature, and were prepared to be very angry indeed if it should turn out that they were obliged to leave the house without the gratification of their hopes.

All behaved in the most amiable and affectionate manner towards their hostess; but Maria Alexandrovna firmly braced her nerves for battle.

Many apparently natural and innocent questions were asked about the prince; but in each one might be detected some hint or insinuation.

Tea came in, and people moved about and changed places: one group surrounded the piano; Zina was requested to play and sing, but answered drily that she was not quite well—and the paleness of her face bore out this assertion. Inquiries were made for Mosgliakoff; and these inquiries were addressed to Zina.

Maria Alexandrovna proved that she had the eyes and ears of ten ordinary mortals. She saw and heard all that was going on in every corner of the room; she heard and answered every question asked, and answered readily and cleverly. She was dreadfully anxious about Zina, however, and wondered why she did not leave the room, as she usually did on such occasions.

Poor Afanassy came in for his share of notice, too. It was the custom of these amiable people of Mordasoff to do their best to set Maria Alexandrovna and her husband “by the ears;” but to-day there were hopes of extracting valuable news and secrets out of the candid simplicity of the latter.

Maria Alexandrovna watched the state of siege into which the wretched Afanassy was thrown, with great anxiety; he was answering “H'm!” to all questions put to him, as instructed; but with so wretched an expression and so extremely artificial a mien that Maria Alexandrovna could barely restrain her wrath.

“Maria Alexandrovna! your husband won't have a word to say to me!” remarked a sharp-faced little lady with a devil-may-care manner, as though she cared nothing for anybody, and was not to be abashed under any circumstances. “Do ask him to be a little more courteous towards ladies!”

“I really don't know myself what can have happened to him to-day!” said Maria Alexandrovna, interrupting her conversation with Mrs. Antipova and Natalia, and laughing merrily; “he is so dreadfully uncommunicative! He has scarcely said a word even to me, all day! Why don't you answer Felisata Michaelovna, Afanassy? What did

you ask him?"

"But, but—why, mammy, you told me yourself"—began the bewildered and lost Afanassy. At this moment he was standing at the fireside with one hand placed inside his waistcoat, in an artistic position which he had chosen deliberately, on mature reflection,—and he was sipping his tea. The questions of the ladies had so confused him that he was blushing like a girl.

When he began the justification of himself recorded above, he suddenly met so dreadful a look in the eyes of his infuriated spouse that he nearly lost all consciousness, for terror!

Uncertain what to do, but anxious to recover himself and win back her favour once more, he said nothing, but took a gulp of tea to restore his scattered senses.

Unfortunately the tea was too hot; which fact, together with the hugeness of the gulp he took—quite upset him. He burned his throat, choked, sent the cup flying, and burst into such a fit of coughing that he was obliged to leave the room for a time, awakening universal astonishment by his conduct.

In a word, Maria Alexandrovna saw clearly enough that her guests knew all about it, and had assembled with malicious intent! The situation was dangerous! They were quite capable of confusing and overwhelming the feeble-minded old prince before her very eyes! They might even carry him off bodily—after stirring up a quarrel between the old man and herself! Anything might happen.

But fate had prepared her one more surprise. The door opened and in came Mosgliakoff—who, as she thought, was far enough away at his godfather's, and would not come near her to-night! She shuddered as though something had hurt her.

Mosgliakoff stood a moment at the door, looking around at the company. He was a little bewildered, and could not conceal his agitation, which showed itself very clearly in his expression.

"Why, it's Paul Alexandrovitch! and you told us he had gone to his godfather's, Maria Alexandrovna. We were told you had hidden yourself away from us, Paul Alexandrovitch!" cried Natalia.

"Hidden myself?" said Paul, with a crooked sort of a smile. "What a strange expression! Excuse me, Natalia Dimitrievna, but I never hide from anyone; I have no cause to do so, that I know of! Nor do I ever hide anyone else!" he added, looking significantly at Maria Alexandrovna.

Maria Alexandrovna trembled in her shoes.

"Surely this fool of a man is not up to anything disagreeable!" she thought. "No, no! that would be worse than anything!" She looked curiously and anxiously into his eyes.

"Is it true, Paul Alexandrovitch, that you have just been politely dismissed?—the Government service, I mean, of course!" remarked the daring Felisata Michaelovna, looking impertinently into his eyes.

"Dismissed! How dismissed? I'm simply changing my department, that's all! I am to be placed at Petersburg!" Mosgliakoff answered, drily.

"Oh! well, I congratulate you!" continued the bold young woman. "We were alarmed to hear that you were trying for a—place down here at Mordasoff. The berths here are wretched, Paul Alexandrovitch—no good at all, I assure you!"

"I don't know—there's a place as teacher at the school, vacant, I believe," remarked Natalia.

This was such a crude and palpable insinuation that even Mrs. Antipova was ashamed of her friend, and kicked her, under the table.

"You don't suppose Paul Alexandrovitch would accept the place vacated by a wretched little schoolmaster!" said Felisata Michaelovna.

But Paul did not answer. He turned at this moment, and encountered Afanassy Matveyevitch, just returning into the room. The latter offered him his hand. Mosgliakoff, like a fool, looked beyond poor Afanassy, and did not take his outstretched hand: annoyed to the limits of endurance, he stepped up to Zina, and muttered, gazing angrily into her eyes:

"This is all thanks to you! Wait a bit; you shall see this very day whether I am a fool or not!"

"Why put off the revelation? It is clear enough already!" said Zina, aloud, staring contemptuously at her former lover.

Mosgliakoff hurriedly left her. He did not half like the loud tone she spoke in.

"Have you been to your godfather's?" asked Maria Alexandrovna at last, determined to sound matters in this direction.

"No, I've just been with uncle."

"With your uncle! What! have you just come from the prince now?"

"Oh—oh! and we were told the prince was asleep!" added Natalia Dimitrievna, looking daggers at Maria Alexandrovna.

"Do not be disturbed about the prince, Natalia Dimitrievna," replied Paul, "he is awake now, and quite restored to his senses. He was persuaded to drink a good deal too much wine, first at your house, and then here; so that he quite lost his head, which never was too strong. However, I have had a talk with him, and he now seems to have entirely recovered his judgment, thank God! He is coming down directly to take his leave, Maria Alexandrovna, and to thank you for all your kind hospitality; and to-morrow morning early we are off to the Hermitage. Thence I shall myself see him safe home to Donchanovo, in order that he may be far from the temptation to further excesses like that of to-day. There I shall give him over into the hands of Stepanida Matveyevna, who must be back at home by this time, and who will assuredly never allow him another opportunity of going on his travels, I'll answer for that!"

So saying, Mosgliakoff stared angrily at Maria Alexandrovna. The latter sat still, apparently dumb with amazement. I regret to say—it gives me great pain to record it—that, perhaps for the first time in her life, my heroine was decidedly alarmed.

"So the prince is off to-morrow morning! Dear me; why is that?" inquired Natalia Dimitrievna, very sweetly, of Maria Alexandrovna.

"Yes. How is that?" asked Mrs. Antipova, in astonishment.

"Yes; dear me! how comes that, I wonder!" said two or three voices. "How can that be? When we were told—dear me! How very strange!"

But the mistress of the house could not find words to reply in.

However, at this moment the general attention was distracted by a most unwonted and eccentric episode. In the next room was heard a strange noise—sharp exclamations and hurrying feet, which was followed by the sudden appearance of Sophia Petrovna, the fidgety guest who had called upon Maria Alexandrovna in the morning.

Sophia Petrovna was a very eccentric woman indeed—so much so that even the good people of Mordasoff could not support her, and had lately voted her out of society. I must observe that every evening, punctually at seven, this lady was in the habit of having, what she called, “a snack,” and that after this snack, which she declared was for the benefit of her liver, her condition was well emancipated, to use no stronger term. She was in this very condition, as described, now, as she appeared flinging herself into Maria Alexandrovna's salon.

“Oho! so this is how you treat me, Maria Alexandrovna!” she shouted at the top of her voice. “Oh! don't be afraid, I shall not inflict myself upon you for more than a minute! I won't sit down. I just came in to see if what they said was true! Ah! so you go in for balls and receptions and parties, and Sophia Petrovna is to sit at home alone, and knit stockings, is she? You ask the whole town in, and leave me out, do you? Yes, and I was mon ange, and ‘dear,’ and all the rest of it when I came in to warn you of Natalia Dimitrievna having got hold of the prince! And now this very Natalia Dimitrievna, whom you swore at like a pickpocket, and who was just about as polite when she spoke of you, is here among your guests? Oh, don't mind me, Natalia Dimitrievna, I don't want your chocolat à la santé at a penny the ounce, six cups to the ounce! thanks, I can do better at home; t'fu, a good deal better.”

“Evidently!” observed Natalia Dimitrievna.

“But—goodness gracious, Sophia Petrovna!” cried the hostess, flushing with annoyance; “what is it all about? Do show a little common sense!”

“Oh, don't bother about me, Maria Alexandrovna, thank you! I know all about it—oh, dear me, yes!—I know all about it!” cried Sophia Petrovna, in her shrill squeaky voice, from among the crowd of guests who now surrounded her, and who seemed to derive immense satisfaction from this unexpected scene. “Oh, yes, I know all about it, I assure you! Your friend Nastasia came over and told me all! You got hold of the old prince, made him drunk and persuaded him to make an offer of marriage to your daughter Zina—whom nobody else will marry; and I daresay you suppose you are going to be a very great lady, indeed—a sort of duchess in lace and jewellery. Tfu! Don't flatter yourself; you may not be aware that I, too, am a colonel's lady! and if you don't care to ask me to your betrothal parties, you needn't: I scorn and despise you and your parties too! I've seen honest women than you, you know! I have dined at Countess Zalichvatsky's; a chief commissioner proposed for my hand! A lot I care for your invitations. Tfu!”

“Look here, Sophia Petrovna,” said Maria Alexandrovna, beside herself with rage; “I assure you that people do not indulge in this sort of sally at respectable houses; especially in the condition you are now in! And let me tell you that if you do not immediately relieve me of your presence and eloquence, I shall be obliged to take the matter into my own hands!”

“Oh, I know—you'll get your people to turn me out! Don't trouble yourself—I know the way out! Good-bye,—marry your daughter to whom you please, for all I care. And as for you, Natalia Dimitrievna, I will thank you not to laugh at me! I may not have been asked here, but at all events I did not dance a can-can for the prince's benefit. What may you be laughing at, Mrs. Antipova? I suppose you haven't heard that your great friend Lushiloff has broken his leg?—he has just been taken home. Tfu! Good-bye, Maria Alexandrovna—good luck to you! Tfu!”

Sophia Petrovna now disappeared. All the guests laughed; Maria Alexandrovna was in a state of indescribable fury.

"I think the good lady must have been drinking!" said Natalia Dimitrievna, sweetly.

"But what audacity!"

"Quelle abominable femme!"

"What a raving lunatic!"

"But really, what excessively improper things she says!"

"Yes, but what could she have meant by a 'betrothal party?' What sort of a betrothal party is this?" asked Felisata Michaelovna innocently.

"It is too bad—too bad!" Maria Alexandrovna burst out at last. "It is just such abominable women as this that sow nonsensical rumours about! it is not the fact that there are such women about, Felisata Michaelovna, that is so surprising; the astonishing part of the matter is that ladies can be found who support and encourage them, and believe their abominable tales, and—"

"The prince, the prince!" cried all the guests at once.

"Oh, oh, here he is—the dear, dear prince!"

"Well, thank goodness, we shall hear all the particulars now!" murmured Felisata Michaelovna to her neighbour.

CHAPTER XIII.

The prince entered and smiled benignly around.

All the agitation which his conversation with Mosgliakoff, a quarter of an hour since, had aroused in his chicken-heart vanished at the sight of the ladies.

Those gentle creatures received him with chirps and exclamations of joy. Ladies always petted our old friend the prince, and were—as a rule—wonderfully familiar with him. He had a way of amusing them with his own individuality which was astonishing! Only this morning Felisata Michaelovna had announced that she would sit on his knee with the greatest pleasure, if he liked; "because he was such a dear old pet of an old man!"

Maria Alexandrovna fastened her eyes on him, to read—if she could—if it were but the slightest indication of his state of mind, and to get a possible idea for a way out of this horribly critical position. But there was nothing to be made of his face; it was just as before—just as ever it was!

"Ah—h! here's the prince at last!" cried several voices. "Oh, Prince, how we have waited and waited for you!"

"With impatience, Prince, with impatience!" another chorus took up the strain.

"Dear me, how very flat—tering!" said the old man, settling himself near the tea-table.

The ladies immediately surrounded him. There only remained Natalia Dimitrievna and Mrs. Antipova with the hostess. Afanassy stood and smiled with great courtesy.

Mosgliakoff also smiled as he gazed defiantly at Zina, who, without taking the slightest notice of him, took a chair near her father, and sat down at the fireside.

"Prince, do tell us—is it true that you are about to leave us so soon?" asked Felisata Michaelovna.

"Yes, yes, mesdames; I am going abroad almost immediately!"

"Abroad, Prince, abroad? Why, what can have caused you to take such a step as that?" cried several ladies at once.

"Yes—yes, abroad," said the prince; "and do you know it is principally for the sake of the new ideas—"

"How, new ideas? what new ideas—what does he mean?" the astonished ladies asked of one another.

"Ye—yes. Quite so—new ideas!" repeated the prince with an air of deep conviction, "everybody goes abroad now for new ideas, and I'm going too, to see if I can pick any up."

Up to this moment Maria Alexandrovna had listened to the conversation observantly; but it now struck her that the prince had entirely forgotten her existence—which would not do!

"Allow me, Prince, to introduce my husband, Afanassy Matveyevitch. He hastened up from our country seat so soon as ever he heard of your arrival in our house."

Afanassy, under the impression that he was being praised, smiled amiably and beamed all over.

"Very happy, very happy—Afanassy Matveyevitch!" said the prince. "Wait a moment: your name reminds me of something, Afanassy Matveyevitch; ye—yes, you are the man down at the village! Charming, charming! Very glad, I'm sure. Do you remember, my boy," (to Paul) "the nice little rhyme we fitted out to him? What was it?"

"Oh, I know, prince," said Felisata Michaelovna—
" 'When the husband's away
The wife will play!'"

"Wasn't that it? We had it last year at the theatre."

"Yes, yes, quite so, ye—yes, 'the wife will play!' That's it: charming, charming. So you are that very man? Dear me, I'm very glad, I'm sure," said the prince, stretching out his hand, but not rising from his chair. "Dear me, and how is your health, my dear sir?"

"H'm!"

"Oh, he's quite well, thank you, prince, quite well," answered Maria Alexandrovna quickly.

"Ye—yes, I see he is—he looks it! And are you still at the village? Dear me, very pleased, I'm sure; why, how red he looks, and he's always laughing."

Afanassy smiled and bowed, and even "scraped," as the prince spoke, but at the last observation he suddenly, and without warning or apparent reason, burst into loud

fits of laughter.

The ladies were delighted. Zina flushed up, and with flashing eyes darted a look at her mother, who, in her turn, was boiling over with rage.

It was time to change the conversation.

"Did you have a nice nap, prince?" she inquired in honied accents; but at the same time giving Afanassy to understand, with very un-honied looks that he might go—well, anywhere!

"Oh, I slept won—derfully, wonderfully? And do you know, I had such a most fascinating, be—witching dream!"

"A dream? how delightful! I do so love to hear people tell their dreams," cried Felisata.

"Oh, a fas—cinating dream," stammered the old man again, "quite be—witching, but all the more a dead secret for that very reas—on."

"Oh, Prince, you don't mean to say you can't tell us?" said Mrs. Antipova. "I suppose it's an extraordinary dream, isn't it?"

"A dead secret!" repeated the prince, purposely whetting the curiosity of the ladies, and enjoying the fun.

"Then it must be interesting, oh, dreadfully interesting," cried other ladies.

"I don't mind taking a bet that the prince dreamed that he was kneeling at some lovely woman's feet and making a declaration of love," said Felisata Michaelovna. "Confess, now, prince, that it was so? confess, dear prince, confess."

"Yes, Prince, confess!" the chorus took up the cry. The old man listened solemnly until the last voice was hushed. The ladies' guesswork flattered his vanity wonderfully; he was as pleased as he could be. "Though I did say that my dream was a dead se—cret," he replied at last, "still I am obliged to confess, dear lady, that to my great as—tonishment you have almost exactly guessed it."

"I've guessed it, I've guessed it," cried Felisata, in a rapture of joy. "Well, prince, say what you like, but it's your plain duty to tell us the name of your beauty; come now, isn't it?"

"Of course, of course, prince."

"Is she in this town?"

"Dear prince, do tell us."

"Darling prince, do, do tell us; you positively must," was heard on all sides.

"Mesdames, mes—dames; if you must know, I will go so far as to say that it is the most charming, and be—witching, and vir—tuous lady I know," said the prince, unctuously.

"The most bewitching? and belonging to this place? Who can it be?" cried the ladies, interchanging looks and signs.

"Why, of course, the young lady who is considered the reigning beauty here," remarked Natalia Dimitrievna, rubbing her hands and looking hard at Zina with those

cat's-eyes of hers. All joined her in staring at Zina.

"But, prince, if you dream those sort of things, why should not you marry somebody bona fide?" asked Felisata, looking around her with a significant expression.

"We would marry you off beautifully, prince!" said somebody else.

"Oh, dear prince, do marry!" chirped another.

"Marry, marry, do marry!" was now the cry on all sides.

"Ye—yes. Why should I not ma—arry!" said the old man, confused and bewildered with all the cries and exclamations around him.

"Uncle!" cried Mosgliakoff.

"Ye—yes, my boy, quite so; I un—derstand what you mean. I may as well tell you, ladies, that I am not in a position to marry again; and having passed one most delightful evening with our fascinating hostess, I must start away to-morrow to the Hermitage, and then I shall go straight off abroad, and study the question of the enlightenment of Europe."

Zina shuddered, and looked over at her mother with an expression of unspeakable anguish.

But Maria Alexandrovna had now made up her mind how to act; all this while she had played a mere waiting game, observing closely and carefully all that was said or done, although she could see only too clearly that her plans were undermined, and that her foes had come about her in numbers which were too great to be altogether pleasant.

At last, however, she comprehended the situation, she thought, completely. She had gauged how the matter stood in all its branches, and she determined to slay the hundred-headed hydra at one fell blow!

With great majesty, then, she rose from her seat, and approached the tea-table, stalking across the room with firm and dignified tread, as she looked around upon her pigmy foes. The fire of inspiration blazed in her eyes. She resolved to smite once, and annihilate this vile nest of poisonous scandal-adders: to destroy the miserable Mosgliakoff, as though he were a blackbeetle, and with one triumphant blow to reassert all her influence over this miserable old idiot-prince!

Some audacity was requisite for such a performance, of course; but Maria Alexandrovna had not even to put her hand in her pocket for a supply of that particular commodity.

"Mesdames," she began, solemnly, and with much dignity (Maria Alexandrovna was always a great admirer of solemnity); "mesdames, I have been a listener to your conversation—to your witty remarks and merry jokes—long enough, and I consider that my turn has come, at last, to put in a word in contribution.

"You are aware we have all met here accidentally (to my great joy, I must add—to my very great joy); but, though I should be the first to refuse to divulge a family secret before the strictest rules of ordinary propriety rendered such a revelation necessary, yet, as my dear guest here appears to me to have given us to understand, by covert hints and insinuations, that he is not averse to the matter becoming common property (he will forgive me if I have mistaken his intentions!)—I cannot help feeling that the prince is not only not averse, but actually desires me to make known our great family secret. Am I right, Prince?"

"Ye—yes, quite so, quite so! Very glad, ve—ry glad, I'm sure!" said the prince, who had not the remotest idea what the good lady was talking about!

Maria Alexandrovna, for greater effect, now paused to take breath, and looked solemnly and proudly around upon the assembled guests, all of whom were now listening with greedy but slightly disturbed curiosity to what their hostess was about to reveal to them.

Mosgliakoff shuddered; Zina flushed up, and arose from her seat; Afanassy, seeing that something important was about to happen, blew his nose violently, in order to be ready for any emergency.

"Yes, ladies; I am ready—nay, gratified—to entrust my family secret to your keeping!—This evening, the prince, overcome by the beauty and virtues of my daughter, has done her the honour of proposing to me for her hand. Prince," she concluded, in trembling tearful accents, "dear Prince; you must not, you cannot blame me for my candour! It is only my overwhelming joy that could have torn this dear secret prematurely from my heart: and what mother is there who will blame me in such a case as this?"

Words fail me to describe the effect produced by this most unexpected sally on the part of Maria Alexandrovna. All present appeared to be struck dumb with amazement. These perfidious guests, who had thought to frighten Maria Alexandrovna by showing her that they knew her secret; who thought to annihilate her by the premature revelation of that secret; who thought to overwhelm her, for the present, with their hints and insinuations; these guests were themselves struck down and pulverized by this fearless candour on her part! Such audacious frankness argued the consciousness of strength.

"So that the prince actually, and of his own free-will is really going to marry Zina? So they did not drink and bully and swindle him into it? So he is not to be married burglariously and forcibly? So Maria Alexandrovna is not afraid of anybody? Then we can't knock this marriage on the head—since the prince is not being married compulsorily!"

Such were the questions and exclamations the visitors now put to themselves and each other.

But very soon the whispers which the hostess's words had awakened all over the room, suddenly changed to chirps and exclamations of joy.

Natalia Dimitrievna was the first to come forward and embrace Maria Alexandrovna; then came Mrs. Antipova; next Felisata Michaelovna. All present were shortly on their feet and moving about, changing places. Many of the ladies were pale with rage. Some began to congratulate Zina, who was confused enough without; some attached themselves to the wretched Afanassy Matveyevitch. Maria Alexandrovna stretched her arms theatrically, and embraced her daughter—almost by force.

The prince alone gazed upon the company with a sort of confused wonder; but he smiled on as before. He seemed to be pleased with the scene. At sight of the mother and daughter embracing, he took out his handkerchief, and wiped his eye, in the corner of which there really was a tear.

Of course the company fell upon him with their congratulations before very long.

"I congratulate you, Prince! I congratulate you!" came from all sides at once.

"So you are going to be married, Prince?"

"So you really are going to marry?"

"Dear Prince! You really are to be married, then?"

"Ye—yes, ye—yes; quite so, quite so!" replied the old fellow, delighted beyond measure with all the rapture and atmosphere of congratulation around him; "and I confess what I like best of all, is the ve—ery kind in—terest you all take in me! I shall never forget it, never for—get it! Charming! charming! You have brought the tears to my eyes!"

"Kiss me, prince!" cried Felisata Michaelovna, in stentorian tones.

"And I con—fess further," continued the Prince, as well as the constant physical interruptions from all sides allowed him; "I confess I am beyond measure as—tonished that Maria Alexandrovna, our revered hostess, should have had the extraordinary penet—ration to guess my dream! She might have dreamed it herself, instead of me. Ex—traordinary perspicacity! Won—derful, wonderful!"

"Oh, prince; your dream again!"

"Oh, come, prince! admit—confess!" cried one and all.

"Yes, prince, it is no use concealing it now; it is time we divulged this secret of ours!" said Maria Alexandrovna, severely and decidedly. "I quite entered into your refined, allegorical manner; the delightful delicacy with which you gave me to understand, by means of subtle insinuations, that you wished the fact of your engagement to be made known. Yes, ladies, it is all true! This very evening the prince knelt at my daughter's feet, and actually, and by no means in a dream, made a solemn proposal of marriage to her!"

"Yes—yes, quite so! just exactly like that; and under the very cir—cumstances she describes: just like re—ality," said the old man. "My dear young lady," he continued, bowing with his greatest courtesy to Zina, who had by no means recovered from her amazement as yet; "my dear young lady, I swear to you, I should never have dared thus to bring your name into pro—minence, if others had not done so before me! It was a most be—witching dream! a be—witching dream! and I am doubly happy that I have been per—mitted to describe it. Charming—charming!"

"Dear me! how very curious it is: he insists on sticking to his idea about a dream!" whispered Mrs. Antipova to the now slightly paling Maria Alexandrovna. Alas! that great woman had felt her heart beating more quickly than she liked without this last little reminder!

"What does it mean?" whispered the ladies among themselves.

"Excuse me, prince," began Maria Alexandrovna, with a miserable attempt at a smile, "but I confess you astonish me a great deal! What is this strange idea of yours about a dream? I confess I had thought you were joking up to this moment; but—if it be a joke on your part, it is exceedingly out of place! I should like—I am anxious to ascribe your conduct to absence of mind, but—"

"Yes; it may really be a case of absence of mind!" put in Natalia Dimitrievna in a whisper.

"Yes—yes—of course, quite so; it may easily be absence of mind!" confirmed the prince, who clearly did not in the least comprehend what they were trying to get out of him; "and with regard to this subject, let me tell you a little an—ecdote. I was asked to a funeral at Petersburg, and I went and made a little mis—take about

it and thought it was a birthday party! So I brought a lovely bouquet of camellias! When I came in and saw the master of the house lying in state on a table, I didn't know where to look, or what to do with my camellias, I assure you!"

"Yes; but, Prince, this is not the moment for stories!" observed Maria Alexandrovna, with great annoyance. "Of course, my daughter has no need to beat up a husband; but at the same time, I must repeat that you yourself here, just by the piano, made her an offer of marriage. I did not ask you to do it! I may say I was amazed to hear it! However, since the episode of your proposal, I may say that I have thought of nothing else; and I have only waited for your appearance to talk the matter over with you. But now—well, I am a mother, and this is my daughter. You speak of a dream. I supposed, naturally, that you were anxious to make your engagement known by the medium of an allegory. Well, I am perfectly well aware that someone may have thought fit to confuse your mind on this matter; in fact, I may say that I have my suspicions as to the individual responsible for such a—however, kindly explain yourself, Prince; explain yourself quickly and satisfactorily. You cannot be permitted to jest in this fashion in a respectable house."

"Ye—yes—quite so, quite so; one should not jest in respectable houses," remarked the prince, still bewildered, but beginning gradually to grow a little disconcerted.

"But that is no answer to my question, Prince. I ask you to reply categorically. I insist upon your confirming—confirming here and at once—the fact that this very evening you made a proposal of marriage to my daughter!"

"Quite so—quite so; I am ready to confirm that! But I have told the company all about it, and Felisata Michaelovna actually guessed my dream!"

"Not dream! it was not a dream!" shouted Maria Alexandrovna furiously. "It was not a dream, Prince, but you were wide awake. Do you hear? Awake—you were awake!"

"Awake?" cried the prince, rising from his chair in astonishment. "Well, there you are, my friend; it has come about just as you said," he added, turning to Mosgliakoff. "But I assure you, most esteemed Maria Alexandrovna, that you are under a delusion. I am quite convinced that I saw the whole scene in a dream!"

"Goodness gracious!" cried Maria Alexandrovna.

"Do not disturb yourself, dear Maria Alexandrovna," said Natalia Dimitrievna, "probably the prince has forgotten; he will recollect himself by and by."

"I am astonished at you, Natalia Dimitrievna!" said the now furious hostess. "As if people forget this sort of thing! Excuse me, Prince, but are you laughing at us, or what are you doing? Are you trying to act one of Dumas' heroes, or Lauzun or Ferlacourt, or somebody? But, if you will excuse me saying so, you are a good deal too old for that sort of thing, and I assure you, your amiable little play-acting will not do here! My daughter is not a French viscountess! I tell you, this very evening and in this very spot here, my daughter sang a ballad to you, and you, amazed at the beauty of her singing, went down on your knees and made her a proposal of marriage. I am not talking in my sleep, am I? Surely I am wide awake? Speak, Prince, am I asleep, or not?"

"Ye—yes, of course, of course—quite so. I don't know," said the bewildered old man. "I mean, I don't think I am dreaming now; but, a little while ago I was asleep, you see; and while asleep I had this dream, that I—"

"Goodness me, Prince, I tell you you were not dreaming. Not dreaming, do you hear? Not dreaming! What on earth do you mean? Are you raving, Prince, or what?"

"Ye—yes; deuce only knows. I don't know! It seems to me I'm getting be—wildered," said the prince, looking around him in a state of considerable mental perturbation.

"But, my dear Prince, how can you possibly have dreamed this, when I can tell you all the minutest details of your proposal and of the circumstances attending it? You have not told any of us of these details. How could I possibly have known what you dreamed?"

"But, perhaps the prince did tell someone of his dream, in detail," remarked Natalia Dimitrievna.

"Ye—yes, quite so—quite so! Perhaps I did tell someone all about my dream, in detail," said the now completely lost and bewildered prince.

"Here's a nice comedy!" whispered Felisata Michaelovna to her neighbour.

"My goodness me! this is too much for anybody's patience!" cried Maria Alexandrovna, beside herself with helpless rage. "Do you hear me, Prince? She sang you a ballad—sang you a ballad! Surely you didn't dream that too?"

"Certainly—cer—tainly, quite so. It really did seem to me that she sang me a ballad," murmured the prince; and a ray of recollection seemed to flash across his face. "My friend," he continued, addressing Mosgliakoff, "I believe I forgot to tell you, there was a ballad sung—a ballad all about castles and knights; and some trou—badour or other came in. Of course, of course, I remember it all quite well. I recoll—ect I did turn over the ballad. It puzzles me much, for now it seems as though I had really heard the ballad, and not dreamt it all."

"I confess, uncle," said Mosgliakoff, as calmly as he could, though his voice shook with agitation, "I confess I do not see any difficulty in bringing your actual experience and your dream into strict conformity; it is consistent enough. You probably did hear the ballad. Miss Zenaïda sings beautifully; probably you all adjourned into this room and Zenaïda Afanassievna sang you the song. Of course, I was not there myself, but in all probability this ballad reminded you of old times; very likely it reminded you of that very vicomtesse with whom you used once to sing, and of whom you were speaking to-day; well, and then, when you went up for your nap and lay down, thinking of the delightful impressions made upon you by the ballad and all, you dreamed that you were in love and made an offer of marriage to the lady who had inspired you with that feeling."

Maria Alexandrovna was struck dumb by this display of barefaced audacity.

"Why, ye—yes, my boy, yes, of course; that's exactly how it really wa—as!" cried the prince, in an ecstasy of delight. "Of course it was the de—lightful impressions that caused me to dream it. I certainly re—member the song; and then I went away and dreamed about my pro—posal, and that I really wished to marry! The viscountess was there too. How beautifully you have unravelled the diffi—culty, my dear boy. Well, now I am quite convinced that it was all a dream. Maria Alex—androvna! I assure you, you are under a delu—sion: it was a dream. I should not think of trifling with your feelings otherwise."

"Oh, indeed! Now I perceive very clearly whom we have to thank for making this dirty mess of our affairs!" cried Maria Alexandrovna, beside herself with rage, and turning to Mosgliakoff: "You are the man, sir—the dishonest person. It is you who stirred up this mud! It is you that puzzled an unhappy old idiot into this eccentric behaviour, because you yourself were rejected! But we shall be quits, my friend, for this offence! You shall pay, you shall pay! Wait a bit, my dishonest friend; wait a bit!"

"Maria Alexandrovna!" cried Mosgliakoff, blushing in his turn until he looked as red as a boiled lobster, "your words are so, so—to such an extent—I really don't know how to express my opinion of you. No lady would ever permit herself to—to—. At all events I am but protecting my relative. You must allow that to allure an old man like this is, is—."

"Quite so, quite so; allure," began the prince, trying to hide himself behind Mosgliakoff.

"Afanassy Matveyevitch!" cried Maria Alexandrovna, in unnatural tones; "do you hear, sir, how these people are shaming and insulting me? Have you quite exempted yourself from all the responsibilities of a man? Or are you actually a—a wooden block, instead of the father of a family? What do you stand blinking there for? eh! Any other husband would have wiped out such an insult to his family with the blood of the offender long ago."

"Wife!" began Afanassy, solemnly, delighted, and proud to find that a need for him had sprung up for once in his life. "Wife, are you quite certain, now, that you did not dream all this? You might so easily have fallen asleep and dreamed it, and then muddled it all up with what really happened, you know, and so—"

But Afanassy Matveyevitch was never destined to complete his ingenious, but unlucky guess.

Up to this moment the guests had all restrained themselves, and had managed, cleverly enough, to keep up an appearance of solid and judicial interest in the proceedings. But at the first sound, almost, of Afanassy's voice, a burst of uncontrollable laughter rose like a tempest from all parts of the room.

Maria Alexandrovna, forgetting all the laws of propriety in her fury, tried to rush at her unlucky consort; but she was held back by force, or, doubtless, she would have scratched out that gentleman's eyes.

Natalia Dimitrievna took advantage of the occasion to add a little, if only a little, drop more of poison to the bitter cup.

"But, dear Maria Alexandrovna," she said, in the sweetest honied tones, "perhaps it may be that it really was so, as your husband suggests, and that you are actually under a strange delusion?"

"How! What was a delusion?" cried Maria Alexandrovna, not quite catching the remark.

"Why, my dear Maria, I was saying, mightn't it have been so, dear, after all? These sort of things do happen sometimes, you know!"

"What sort of things do happen, eh? What are you trying to do with me? What am I to make of you?"

"Why, perhaps, dear, you really did dream it all!"

"What? dream it! I dreamed it? And you dare suggest such a thing to me—straight to my face?"

"Oh, why not? Perhaps it really was the case," observed Felisata Michaelovna.

"Ye—yes, quite so, very likely it act—ually was the case," muttered the old prince.

"He, too-gracious Heaven!" cried poor Maria Alexandrovna, wringing her hands.

"Dear me, how you do worry yourself, Maria Alexandrovna. You should remember that dreams are sent us by a good Providence. If Providence so wills it, there is no more to be said. Providence gives the word, and we can neither weep nor be angry at its dictum."

"Quite so, quite so. We can't be a-angry about it," observed the prince.

"Look here; do you take me for a lunatic, or not?" said Maria Alexandrovna. She spoke with difficulty, so dreadfully was she panting with fury. It was more than flesh and blood could stand. She hurriedly grasped a chair, and fell fainting into it. There was a scene of great excitement.

"She has fainted in obedience to the laws of propriety!" observed Natalia Dimitrievna to Mrs. Antipova. But at this moment—at this moment when the general bewilderment and confusion had reached its height, and when the scene was strained to the last possible point of excitement, another actor suddenly stepped to the front; one who had been silent hitherto, but who immediately threw quite a different complexion on the scene.

CHAPTER XIV.

Zenaida, or Zina Afanassievna, was an individual of an extremely romantic turn of mind.

I don't know whether it really was that she had read too much of "that fool Shakespeare," with her "little tutor fellow," as Maria Alexandrovna insisted; but, at all events she was very romantic. However, never, in all her experience of Mordasoff life, had Zina before made such an ultra-romantic, or perhaps I might call it heroic, display as on the occasion of the sally which I am now about to describe.

Pale, and with resolution in her eyes, yet almost trembling with agitation, and wonderfully beautiful in her anger and scorn, she stepped to the front.

Gazing around at all, defiantly, she approached her mother in the midst of the sudden silence which had fallen on all present. Her mother roused herself from her swoon at the first indication of a projected movement on Zina's part, and she now opened her eyes.

"Mamma!" cried Zina, "why should we deceive anyone? Why befoul ourselves with more lies? Everything is so foul already that surely it is not worth while to bemean ourselves any further by attempting to gloss over the filth!"

"Zina, Zina! what are you thinking of? Do recollect yourself!" cried Maria Alexandrovna, frightened out of her wits, and jumping briskly up from her chair.

"I told you, mamma—I told you before, that I should not be able to last out the length of this shameful and ignominious business!" continued Zina. "Surely we need no further bemean and befoul ourselves! I will take it all on myself, mamma. I am the basest of all, for lending myself, of my own free will, to this abominable intrigue! You are my mother; you love me, I know, and you wished to arrange matters for my happiness, as you thought best, and according to your lights. Your conduct, therefore, is pardonable; but mine! oh, no! never, never!"

"Zina, Zina! surely you are not going to tell the whole story? Oh! woe, woe! I felt that the knife would pierce my heart!"

"Yes, mamma, I shall tell all; I am disgraced, you—we all of us are disgraced—"

"Zina, you are exaggerating! you are beside yourself; and you don't know what you are saying. And why say anything about it? The ignominy and disgrace is not on our side, dear child; I will show in a moment that it is not on our side!"

"No, mamma, no!" cried Zina, with a quiver of rage in her voice, "I do not wish to remain silent any longer before these—persons, whose opinion I despise, and who have come here for the purpose of laughing at us. I do not wish to stand insult from any one of them; none of them have any right to throw dirt at me; every single one of them would be ready at any moment to do things thirty times as bad as anything either I or you have done or would do! Dare they, can they constitute themselves our judges?"

"Listen to that!"

"There's a pretty little speech for you!"

"Why, that's us she's abusing"!

"A nice sort of creature she is herself!"

These and other such-like exclamations greeted the conclusion of Zina's speech.

"Oh, she simply doesn't know what she's talking about!" observed Natalia Dimitrievna.

We will make a digression, and remark that Natalia Dimitrievna was quite right there!

For if Zina did not consider these women competent to judge herself, why should she trouble herself to make those exposures and admissions which she proposed to reveal in their presence? Zina was in much too great a hurry. (She always was,—so the best heads in Mordasoff had agreed!) All might have been set right; all might have been satisfactorily arranged! Maria Alexandrovna was a great deal to blame this night, too! She had been too much "in a hurry," like her daughter,—and too arrogant! She should have simply raised the laugh at the old prince's expense, and turned him out of the house! But Zina, in despite of all common sense (as indicated above), and of the sage opinions of all Mordasoff, addressed herself to the prince:

"Prince," she said to the old man, who actually rose from his arm-chair to show his respect for the speaker, so much was he struck by her at this moment!—"Prince forgive us; we have deceived you; we entrapped you—"

"Will you be quiet, you wretched girl?" cried Maria Alexandrovna, wild with rage.

"My dear young lady—my dear child, my darling child!" murmured the admiring prince.

But the proud haughty character of Zina had led her on to cross the barrier of all propriety;—she even forgot her own mother who lay fainting at her feet—a victim to the self-exposure her daughter indulged in.

"Yes, prince, we both cheated you. Mamma was in fault in that she determined that I must marry you; and I in that I consented thereto. We filled you with wine; I sang to you and postured and posed for your admiration. We tricked you, a weak defenceless old man, we tricked you (as Mr. Mosgliakoff would express it!) for the sake of your wealth, and your rank. All this was shockingly mean, and I freely admit the fact. But I swear to you, Prince, that I consented to all this baseness from motives which were not base. I wished,—but what a wretch I am! it is doubly

mean to justify one's conduct in such a case as this! But I will tell you, Prince, that if I had accepted anything from you, I should have made it up to you for it, by being your plaything, your servant, your—your ballet dancer, your slave—anything you wished. I had sworn to this, and I should have kept my oath."

A severe spasm at the throat stopped her for a moment; while all the guests sat and listened like so many blocks of wood, their eyes and mouths wide open.

This unexpected, and to them perfectly unintelligible sally on Zina's part had utterly confounded them. The old prince alone was touched to tears, though he did not understand half that Zina said.

"But I will marry you, my beau—t—iful child, I will marry you, if you like"—he murmured, "and est—eem it a great honour, too! But I as—sure you it was all a dream,—what does it mat—ter what I dream? Why should you take it so to heart? I don't seem to under—stand it all; please explain, my dear friend, what it all means!" he added, to Paul.

"As for you, Pavel Alexandrovitch," Zina recommenced, also turning to Mosgliakoff, "you whom I had made up my mind, at one time, to look upon as my future husband; you who have now so cruelly revenged yourself upon me; must you needs have allied yourself to these people here, whose object at all times is to humiliate and shame me? And you said that you loved me! However, it is not for me to preach moralities to you, for I am worse than all! I wronged you, distinctly, in holding out false hopes and half promises. I never loved you, and if I had agreed to be your wife, it would have been solely with the view of getting away from here, out of this accursed town, and free of all this meanness and baseness. However, I swear to you that had I married you, I should have been a good and faithful wife! You have taken a cruel vengeance upon me, and if that flatters your pride, then—"

"Zina!" cried Mosgliakoff.

"If you still hate me—"

"Zina!!"

"If you ever did love me—"

"Zenaida Afanassievna!"

"Zina, Zina—my child!" cried Maria Alexandrovna.

"I am a blackguard, Zina—a blackguard, and nothing else!" cried Mosgliakoff; while all the assembled ladies gave way to violent agitation. Cries of amazement and of wrath broke upon the silence; but Mosgliakoff himself stood speechless and miserable, without a thought and without a word to plead for him!

"I am an ass, Zina," he cried at last, in an outburst of wild despair,—“an ass! oh far, far worse than an ass. But I will prove to you, Zina, that even an ass can behave like a generous human being! Uncle, I cheated you! I, I—it was I who cheated you: you were not asleep,—you were wide awake when you made this lady an offer of marriage! And I—scoundrel that I was—out of revenge because I was rejected by her myself, persuaded you that you had dreamed it all!"

"Dear me, what wonderful and interesting revelations we are being treated to now!" whispered Natalia to Mrs. Antipova.

"My dear friend," replied the prince, "com—pose yourself, do! I assure you—quite start—led me with that sudden ex—clamation of yours! Besides, you are

labouring under a delusion;—I will marr—y the lady, of course, if ne—cessary. But you told me, yourself, it was all a dre—eam!”

“Oh, how am I to tell you? Do show me, somebody, how to explain to him! Uncle, uncle! this is an important matter—a most important family affair! Think of that, uncle—just try to realise that—”

“Wait a bit, my boy—wait a bit: let me think! First there was my coachman, Theophile—”

“Oh, never mind Theophile now, for goodness sake!”

“Of course we need not waste time over The—ophile. Well—then came Na—poleon; and then we seemed to be sitting at tea, and some la—dy came and ate up all our su—gar!”

“But, uncle!” cried Mosgliakoff, at his wits' end, “it was Maria Alexandrovna herself told us that anecdote about Natalia Dimitrievna! I was here myself and heard it!—I was a blackguard, and listened at the keyhole!”

“How, Maria Alexandrovna!” cried Natalia, “you've told the prince too, have you, that I stole sugar out of your basin? So I come to you to steal your sugar, do I, eh! do I?”

“Get away from me!” cried Maria Alexandrovna, with the abandonment of utter despair.

“Oh, dear no! I shall do nothing of the sort, Maria Alexandrovna! I steal your sugar, do I? I tell you you shall not talk of me like that, madam—you dare not! I have long suspected you of spreading this sort of rubbish abroad about me! Sophia Petrovna came and told me all about it. So I stole your sugar, did I, eh?”

“But, my dear la—dies!” said the prince, “it was only part of a dream! What do my dreams matter?—”

“Great tub of a woman!” muttered Maria Alexandrovna through her teeth.

“What! what! I'm a tub, too, am I?” shrieked Natalia Dimitrievna. “And what are you yourself, pray? Oh, I have long known that you call me a tub, madam. Never mind!—at all events my husband is a man, madam, and not a fool, like yours!”

“Ye—yes—quite so! I remember there was something about a tub, too!” murmured the old man, with a vague recollection of his late conversation with Maria Alexandrovna.

“What—you, too? you join in abusing a respectable woman of noble extraction, do you? How dare you call me names, prince—you wretched old one-legged misery! I'm a tub am I, you one-legged old abomination?”

“Wha—at, madam, I one-legged?”

“Yes—one-legged and toothless, sir; that's what you are!”

“Yes, and one-eyed too!” shouted Maria Alexandrovna.

“And what's more, you wear stays instead of having your own ribs!” added Natalia Dimitrievna.

“His face is all on wire springs!”

"He hasn't a hair of his own to swear by!"

"Even the old fool's moustache is stuck on!" put in Maria Alexandrovna.

"Well, Ma-arie Alexandrovna, give me the credit of having a nose of my ve-ry own, at all events!" said the prince, overwhelmed with confusion under these unexpected disclosures. "My friend, it must have been you betrayed me! you must have told them that my hair is stuck on?"

"Uncle, what an idea, I—!"

"My dear boy, I can't stay here any lon-ger, take me away somewhere—quelle société! Where have you brought me to, eh?—Gracious Hea-eaven, what dreadful soc-iety!"

"Idiot! scoundrel!" shrieked Maria Alexandrovna.

"Goodness!" said the unfortunate old prince. "I can't quite remember just now what I came here for at all—I suppose I shall reme-mber directly. Take me away, quick, my boy, or I shall be torn to pieces here! Besides, I have an i-dea that I want to make a note of—"

"Come along, uncle—it isn't very late; I'll take you over to an hotel at once, and I'll move over my own things too."

"Ye-yes, of course, a ho-tel! Good-bye, my charming child; you alone, you-are the only vir-tuous one of them all; you are a no-oble child. Good-bye, my charming girl! Come along, my friend;—oh, good gra-cious, what people!"

I will not attempt to describe the end of this disagreeable scene, after the prince's departure.

The guests separated in a hurricane of scolding and abuse and mutual vituperation, and Maria Alexandrovna was at last left alone amid the ruins and relics of her departed glory.

Alas, alas! Power, glory, weight—all had disappeared in this one unfortunate evening. Maria Alexandrovna quite realised that there was no chance of her ever again mounting to the height from which she had now fallen. Her long preeminence and despotism over society in general had collapsed.

What remained to her? Philosophy? She was wild with the madness of despair all night! Zina was dishonoured—scandals would circulate, never-ceasing scandals; and—oh! it was dreadful!

As a faithful historian, I must record that poor Afanassy was the scapegoat this night; he "caught it" so terribly that he eventually disappeared; he had hidden himself in the garret, and was there starved to death almost, with cold, all night.

The morning came at last; but it brought nothing good with it! Misfortunes never come singly.

CHAPTER XV.

If fate makes up its mind to visit anyone with misfortune, there is no end to its malice! This fact has often been remarked by thinkers; and, as if the ignominy of last night were not enough, the same malicious destiny had prepared for this family more, yea, and worse—evils to come!

By ten o'clock in the morning a strange and almost incredible rumour was in full swing all over the town: it was received by society, of course, with full measure of spiteful joy, just as we all love to receive delightfully scandalous stories of anyone about us.

"To lose one's sense of shame to such an extent!" people said one to another.

"To humiliate oneself so, and to neglect the first rules of propriety! To loose the bands of decency altogether like this, really!" etc., etc.

But here is what had happened.

Early in the morning, something after six o'clock, a poor piteous-looking old woman came hurriedly to the door of Maria Alexandrovna's house, and begged the maid to wake Miss Zina up as quickly, as possible,—only Miss Zina, and very quietly, so that her mother should not hear of it, if possible.

Zina, pale and miserable, ran out to the old woman immediately.

The latter fell at Zina's feet and kissed them and begged her with tears to come with her at once to see poor Vaísia, her son, who had been so bad, so bad all night that she did not think he could live another day.

The old woman told Zina that Vaísia had sent to beg her to come and bid him farewell in this his death hour: he conjured her to come by all the blessed angels, and by all their past—otherwise he must die in despair.

Zina at once decided to go, in spite of the fact that, by so doing, she would be justifying all the scandal and slanders disseminated about her in former days, as to the intercepted letter, her visits to him, and so on. Without a word to her mother, then, she donned her cloak and started off with the old woman, passing through the whole length of the town, into one of the poorest slums of Mordasof—and stopped at a little low wretched house, with small miserable windows, and snow piled round the basement for warmth.

In this house, in a tiny room, more than half of which was occupied by an enormous stove, on a wretched bed, and covered with a miserably thin quilt, lay a young man, pale and haggard: his eyes were ablaze with the fire of fever, his hands were dry and thin, and he was breathing with difficulty and very hoarsely. He looked as though he might have been handsome once, but disease had put its finger on his features and made them dreadful to look upon and sad withal, as are so many dying consumptive patients' faces.

His old mother who had fed herself for a year past with the conviction that her son would recover, now saw at last that Vaísia was not to live. She stood over him, bowed down with her grief—tearless, and looked and looked, and could not look enough; and felt, but could not realize, that this dear son of hers must in a few days be buried in the miserable Mordasof churchyard, far down beneath the snow and frozen earth!

But Vaísia was not looking at her at this moment! His poor suffering face was at rest now, and happy; for he saw before him the dear image which he had thought of, dreamed of, and loved through all the long sad nights of his illness, for the last year and a half! He realised that she forgave him, and had come, like an angel of God, to tell him of her forgiveness, here, on his deathbed.

She pressed his hands, wept over him, stood and smiled over him, looked at him once more with those wonderful eyes of hers, and all the past, the undying ever-present past rose up before the mind's eye of the dying man. The spark of life flashed up

again in his soul, as though to show, now that it was about to die out for ever on this earth, how hard, how hard it was to see so sweet a light fade away.

"Zina, Zina!" he said, "my Zina, do not weep; don't grieve, Zina, don't remind me that I must die! Let me gaze at you, so—so,—and feel that our two souls have come together once more—that you have forgiven me! Let me kiss your dear hands again, as I used, and so let me die without noticing the approach of death.

"How thin you have grown, Zina! and how sweetly you are looking at me now, my Zina! Do you remember how you used to laugh, in bygone days? Oh, Zina, my angel, I shall not ask you to forgive me,—I will not remember anything about—that, you know what! for if you do forgive me, I can never forgive myself!

"All the long, long nights, Zina, I have lain here and thought, and thought; and I have long since decided that I had better die, Zina; for I am not fit to live!"

Zina wept, and silently pressed his hands, as though she would stop him talking so.

"Why do you cry so?" continued the sick man. "Is it because I am dying? but all the past is long since dead and buried, Zina, my angel! You are wiser than I am, you know I am a bad, wicked man; surely you cannot love me still? Do you know what it has cost me to realise that I am a bad man? I, who have always prided myself before the world—and what on? Purity of heart, generosity of aim! Yes, Zina, so I did, while we read Shakespeare; and in theory I was pure and generous. Yet, how did I prove these qualities in practice?"

"Oh, don't! don't!" sobbed Zina, "you are not fair to yourself: don't talk like this, please don't!"

"Don't stop me, Zina! You forgave me, my angel; I know you forgave me long ago, but you must have judged me, and you know what sort of man I really am; and that is what tortures me so! I am unworthy of your love, Zina! And you were good and true, not only in theory, but in practice too! You told your mother you would marry me, and no one else, and you would have kept your word! Do you know, Zina, I never realized before what you would sacrifice in marrying me! I could not even see that you might die of hunger if you did so! All I thought of was that you would be the bride of a great poet (in the future), and I could not understand your reasons for wishing to delay our union! So I reproached you and bullied you, and despised you and suspected you, and at last I committed the crime of showing your letter! I was not even a scoundrel at that moment! I was simply a worm-man. Ah! how you must have despised me! No, it is well that I am dying; it is well that you did not marry me! I should not have understood your sacrifice, and I should have worried you, and perhaps, in time, have learned to hate you, and ... but now it is good, it is best so! my bitter tears can at least cleanse my heart before I die. Ah! Zina! Zina! love me, love me as you did before for a little, little while! just for the last hour of my life. I know I am not worthy of it, but—oh, my angel, my Zina!"

Throughout this speech Zina, sobbing herself, had several times tried to stop the speaker; but he would not listen. He felt that he must unburden his soul by speaking out, and continued to talk—though with difficulty, panting, and with choking and husky utterance.

"Oh, if only you had never seen me and never loved me," said Zina, "you would have lived on now! Ah, why did we ever meet?"

"No, no, darling, don't blame yourself because I am dying! think of all my self-love, my romanticism! I am to blame for all, myself! Did they ever tell you my story in full? Do you remember, three years ago, there was a criminal here sentenced to death? This man heard that a criminal was never executed whilst ill!

so he got hold of some wine, mixed tobacco in it, and drank it. The effect was to make him so dreadfully sick, with blood-spitting, that his lungs became affected; he was taken to a hospital, and a few weeks after he died of virulent consumption! Well, on that day, you know, after the letter, it struck me that I would do the same; and why do you think I chose consumption? Because I was afraid of any more sudden death? Perhaps. But, oh, Zina! believe me, a romantic nonsense played a great part in it; at all events, I had an idea that it would be striking and grand for me to be lying here, dying of consumption, and you standing and wringing your hands for woe that love should have brought me to this! You should come, I thought, and beg my pardon on your knees, and I should forgive you and die in your arms!"

"Oh, don't! don't!" said Zina, "don't talk of it now, dear! you are not really like that. Think of our happy days together, think of something else—not that, not that!"

"Oh, but it's so bitter to me, darling; and that's why I must speak of it. I haven't seen you for a year and a half, you know, and all that time I have been alone; and I don't think there was one single minute of all that time when I have not thought of you, my angel, Zina! And, oh! how I longed to do something to earn a better opinion from you! Up to these very last days I have never believed that I should really die; it has not killed me all at once, you know. I have long walked about with my lungs affected. For instance, I have longed to become a great poet suddenly, to publish a poem such as has never appeared before on this earth; I intended to pour my whole soul and being into it, so that wherever I was, or wherever you were, I should always be with you and remind you of myself in my poems! And my greatest longing of all was that you should think it all over and say to yourself at last some day, 'No, he is not such a wretch as I thought, after all!' It was stupid of me, Zina, stupid—stupid—wasn't it, darling?"

"No, no, Vaísia—no!" cried Zina. She fell on his breast and kissed his poor hot, dry hands.

"And, oh! how jealous I have been of you all this time, Zina! I think I should have died if I had heard of your wedding. I kept a watch over you, you know; I had a spy—there!" (he nodded towards his mother). "She used to go over and bring me news. You never loved Mosgliakoff—now did you, Zina? Oh, my darling, my darling, will you remember me when I am dead? Oh, I know you will; but years go by, Zina, and hearts grow cold, and yours will cool too, and you'll forget me, Zina!"

"No, no, never! I shall never marry. You are my first love, and my only—only—undying love!"

"But all things die, Zina, even our memories, and our good and noble feelings die also, and in their place comes reason. No, no, Zina, be happy, and live long. Love another if you can, you cannot love a poor dead man for ever! But think of me now and then, if only seldom; don't think of my faults: forgive them! For oh, Zina, there was good in that sweet love of ours as well as evil. Oh, golden, golden days never to be recalled! Listen, darling, I have always loved the sunset hour—remember me at that time, will you? Oh no, no! why must I die? oh how I should love to live on now. Think of that time—oh, just think of it! it was all spring then, the sun shone so bright, the flowers were so sweet, ah me! and look, now—look!"

And the poor thin finger pointed to the frozen window-pane. Then he seized Zina's hand and pressed it tight over his eyes, and sighed bitterly—bitterly! His sobs nearly burst his poor suffering breast.... And so he continued suffering and talking all the long day. Zina comforted and soothed him as she best could, but she too was full of deadly grief and pain. She told him—she promised him—never to forget; that she would never love again as she loved him; and he believed her and wept, and smiled again, and kissed her hands. And so the day passed.

Meanwhile, Maria Alexandrovna had sent some ten times for Zina, begging her not to ruin her reputation irretrievably. At last, at dusk, she determined to go herself; she was out of her wits with terror and grief.

Having called Zina out into the next room, she proceeded to beg and pray her, on her knees, "to spare this last dagger at her heart!"

Zina had come out from the sick-room ill: her head was on fire,—she heard, but could not comprehend, what her mother said; and Marie Alexandrovna was obliged to leave the house again in despair, for Zina had determined to sit up all night with Vaísia.

She never left his bedside, but the poor fellow grew worse and worse. Another day came, but there was no hope that the sick man would see its close. His old mother walked about as though she had lost all control of her actions; grief had turned her head for the time; she gave her son medicines, but he would none of them! His death agony dragged on and on! He could not speak now, and only hoarse inarticulate sounds proceeded from his throat. To the very last instant he stared and stared at Zina, and never took his eyes off her; and when their light failed them he still groped with uncertain fingers for her hand, to press and fondle it in his own!

Meanwhile the short winter day was waning! And when at even the last sunbeam gilded the frozen window-pane of the little room, the soul of the sufferer fled in pursuit of it out of the emaciated body that had kept it prisoner.

The old mother, seeing that there was nothing left her now but the lifeless body of her beloved Vaísia, wrung her hands, and with a loud cry flung herself on his dead breast.

"This is your doing, you viper, you cursed snake," she yelled to Zina, in her despair; "it was you ruined and killed him, you wicked, wretched girl." But Zina heard nothing. She stood over the dead body like one bereft of her senses.

At last she bent over him, made the sign of the Cross, kissed him, and mechanically left the room. Her eyes were ablaze, her head whirled. Two nights without sleep, combined with her turbulent feelings, were almost too much for her reason; she had a sort of confused consciousness that all her past had just been torn out of her heart, and that a new life was beginning for her, dark and threatening.

But she had not gone ten paces when Mosgliakoff suddenly seemed to start up from the earth at her feet.

He must have been waiting for her here.

"Zenaida Afanassievna," he began, peering all around him in what looked like timid haste; it was still pretty light. "Zenaida Afanassievna, of course I am an ass, or, if you please, perhaps not quite an ass, for I really think I am acting rather generously this time. Excuse my blundering, but I am rather confused, from a variety of causes."

Zina glanced at him almost unconsciously, and silently went on her way. There was not much room for two on the narrow pavement, and as Zina did not make way for Paul, the latter was obliged to walk on the road at the side, which he did, never taking his eyes off her face.

"Zenaida Afanassievna," he continued, "I have thought it all over, and if you are agreeable I am willing to renew my proposal of marriage. I am even ready to forget all that has happened; all the ignominy of the last two days, and to forgive it—but

on one condition: that while we are still here our engagement is to remain a strict secret. You will depart from this place as soon as ever you can, and I shall quietly follow you. We will be married secretly, somewhere, so that nobody shall know anything about it; and then we'll be off to St. Petersburg by express post—don't take more than a small bag—eh? What say you, Zenaïda Afanassiévna; tell me quick, please, I can't stay here. We might be seen together, you know."

Zina did not answer a word; she only looked at Mosgliakoff; but it was such a look that he understood all instantly, bowed, and disappeared down the next lane.

"Dear me," he said to himself, "what's the meaning of this? The day before yesterday she became so jolly humble, and blamed herself all round. I've come on the wrong day, evidently!"

Meanwhile event followed event in Mordasof.

A very tragical circumstance occurred.

The old prince, who moved over to the hotel with Mosgliakoff, fell very ill that same night, dangerously ill. All Mordasof knew of it in the morning; the doctor never left his side. That evening a consultation of all the local medical talent was held over the old man (the invitations to which were issued in Latin); but in spite of the Latin and all they could do for him, the poor prince was quite off his head; he raved and asked his doctor to sing him some ballad or other; raved about wigs, and occasionally cried out as though frightened.

The Mordasof doctors decided that the hospitality of the town had given the prince inflammation of the stomach, which had somehow "gone to the head."

There might be some subordinate moral causes to account for the attack; but at all events he ought to have died long ago; and so he would certainly die now.

In this last conclusion they were not far wrong; for the poor old prince breathed his last three days after, at the hotel.

This event impressed the Mordasof folk considerably. No one had expected such a tragical turn of affairs. They went in troops to the hotel to view the poor old body, and there they wagged their heads wisely and ended by passing severe judgment upon "the murderers of the unfortunate Prince,"—meaning thereby, of course, Maria Alexandrovna and her daughter. They predicted that this matter would go further. Mosgliakoff was in a dreadful state of perturbation: he did not know what to do with the body. Should he take it back to Donchanof! or what? Perhaps he would be held responsible for the old man's death, as he had brought him here? He did not like the look of things. The Mordasof people were less than useless for advice, they were all far too frightened to hazard a word.

But suddenly the scene changed.

One fine evening a visitor arrived—no less a person than the eminent Prince Shepetiloff, a young man of thirty-five, with colonel's epaulettes, a relative of the dead man. His arrival created a great stir among all classes at Mordasof.

It appeared that this gentleman had lately left St. Petersburg, and had called in at Donchanof. Finding no one there, he had followed the prince to Mordasof, where the news and circumstances of the old man's death fell upon him like a thunder-clap!

Even the governor felt a little guilty while detailing the story of the prince's death: all Mordasof felt and looked guilty.

This visitor took the matter entirely into his own hands, and Mosgliakoff made himself scarce before the presence of the prince's real nephew, and disappeared, no one knew whither.

The body was taken to the monastery, and all the Mordasof ladies flocked thither to the funeral. It was rumoured that Maria Alexandrovna was to be present, and that she was to go on her knees before the coffin, and loudly pray for pardon; and that all this was in conformity with the laws of the country.

Of course this was all nonsense, and Maria Alexandrovna never went near the place!

I forgot to state that the latter had carried off Zina to the country house, not deeming it possible to continue to live in the town. There she sat, and trembled over all the second-hand news she could get hold of as to events occurring at Mordasof.

The funeral procession passed within half a mile of her country house; so that Maria Alexandrovna could get a good view of the long train of carriages looking black against the white snow roads; but she could not bear the sight, and left the window.

Before the week was out, she and her daughter moved to Moscow, taking Afanassy Matveyevitch with them; and, within a month, the country house and town house were both for sale.

And so Mordasof lost its most eminent inhabitant for ever!

Afanassy Matveyevitch was said to be for sale with the country house.

A year—two years went by, and Mordasof had quite forgotten Maria Alexandrovna, or nearly so! Alas! so wags the world! It was said that she had bought another estate, and had moved over to some other provincial capital; where, of course, she had everybody under her thumb; that Zina was not yet married; and that Afanassy Matveyevitch—but why repeat all this nonsense? None of it was true; it was but rumour!—

It is three years since I wrote the last words of the above chronicles of Mordasof, and whoever would have believed that I should have to unfold my MS., and add another piece of news to my narrative?

Well, to business!—

Let's begin with Paul Mosgliakoff.—After leaving Mordasof, he went straight to St. Petersburg, where he very soon obtained the clerkship he had applied for. He then promptly forgot all about Mordasof, and the events enacted there. He enjoyed life, went into society, fell in love, made another offer of marriage, and had to swallow another snub; became disgusted with Petersburg life, and joined an expedition to one of the remote quarters of our vast empire.

This expedition passed through its perils of land and water, and arrived in due course at the capital of the remote province which was its destination.

There the members were well received by the governor, and a ball was arranged for their entertainment.

Mosgliakoff was delighted. He donned his best Petersburg uniform, and proceeded to the large ball-room with the full intention of producing a great and startling effect. His first duty was to make his bow to the governor-general's lady, of whom

it was rumoured that she was young, and very lovely.

He advanced then, with some little "swagger," but was suddenly rooted to the spot with amazement. Before him stood Zina, beautifully dressed, proud and haughty, and sparkling with diamonds! She did not recognize him; her eyes rested a moment on his face, and then passed on to glance at some other person.

Paul immediately departed to a safe and quiet corner, and there button-holed a young civilian whom he questioned, and from whom he learned certain most interesting facts. He learned that the governor-general had married a very rich and very lovely lady in Moscow, two years since; that his wife was certainly very beautiful, but, at the same time, excessively proud and haughty, and danced with none but generals. That the governor's lady had a mother, a lady of rank and fashion, who had followed them from Moscow; that this lady was very clever and wise, but that even she was quite under the thumb of her daughter; as for the general (the governor), he doted on his wife.

Mosgliakoff inquired after our old friend Afanassy; but in their "remote province" nothing was known of that gentleman.

Feeling a little more at home presently, Paul began to walk about the room, and shortly espied Maria Alexandrovna herself. She was wonderfully dressed, and was surrounded by a bevy of ladies who evidently dwelt in the glory of her patronage: she appeared to be exceedingly amiable to them—wonderfully so!

Paul plucked up courage and introduced himself. Maria Alexandrovna seemed to give a shudder at first sight of him, but in an instant she was herself again. She was kind enough to recognise Paul, and to ask him all sorts of questions as to his Petersburg experiences, and so on. She never said a word about Mordasof, however. She behaved as though no such place existed.

After a minute or so, and having dropped a question as to some Petersburg prince whom Paul had never so much as heard of, she turned to speak to another young gentleman standing by, and in a second or two was entirely oblivious of Mosgliakoff. With a sarcastic smile our friend passed on into the large hall. Feeling offended—though he knew not why—he decided not to dance. So he leant his back against one of the pillars, and for a couple of hours did nothing but follow Zina about with his eyes. But alas! all the grace of his figure and attitude, and all the fascinations of his general appearance were lost upon her, she never looked at him.

At last, with legs stiff from standing, tired, hungry, and feeling miserable generally, he went home. Here he tossed about half the night thinking of the past, and next morning, having the chance of joining a branch party of his expedition, he accepted the opportunity with delight, and left the town at once.

The bells tinkled, the horses trotted gaily along, kicking up snowballs as they went. Paul Mosgliakoff fell to thinking, then he fell to snoring, and so he continued until the third station from the start; there he awoke fresh and jolly, and with the new scenery came newer, and healthier, and pleasanter thoughts.

Footnotes

1. The present value of a rouble is about two shillings.
2. Short for Alexander and Nadejda

THE END