

Dostoyevsky Fyodor

Uncle's Dream; and The Permanent Husband



Федор Достоевский

**Uncle's Dream; and The
Permanent Husband**

«Public Domain»

Достоевский Ф. М.

Uncle's Dream; and The Permanent Husband / Ф. М. Достоевский —
«Public Domain»,

© Достоевский Ф. М.
© Public Domain

Содержание

UNCLE'S DREAM	5
CHAPTER I	5
CHAPTER II	8
CHAPTER III	11
CHAPTER IV	16
CHAPTER V	22
CHAPTER VI	29
CHAPTER VII	34
CHAPTER VIII	38
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	42

Dostoyevsky Fyodor

Uncle's Dream; and The Permanent Husband

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 *comme-il-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 Zenaida, Maria Alexandrovna's and Afanassy's daughter? Zenaida 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 Zenaida 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 be – 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 a – go, 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 Zenaïda 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 *maggies* 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 Guadalquivir 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 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 – prise 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 at – tractive, 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 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. “As – surely I shall go! And if only I could venture to hope – oh! you be – witching child, charming, be – witching 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 *Hirondelle*! I want that other song,” whined the prince, just like any 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.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.