WHISHAW FREDERICK

MOSCOW: A STORY OF THE FRENCH INVASION OF 1812

Frederick Whishaw

Moscow: A Story of the French Invasion of 1812

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=34336314
Moscow: A Story of the French Invasion of 1812:

Содержание

Frederick Whishaw
Moscow: A Story of the French Invasion of 1812

CHAPTER I

With a great jangling of sleigh-bells and much shouting from his driver, who addressed the three horses by every epithet both endearing and abusive that his vocabulary could provide, Count Maximof drove into the yard of his nearest neighbour, the Boyar Demidof. The visit was expected, for Maximof had sent a messenger to give warning of his approach and to notify the boyar of the object of his coming. The Count was accompanied by his wife, Avdotia, and his son, a child of ten years, as well as by the priest of the district who had been picked up *en route* at his own village. The child Alexander, commonly called Sasha, sat by the driver, a young serf of surly appearance and manners, while the three elders occupied—as best they could—the cushioned seat behind. This was designed to hold two with moderate comfort, so that the two outside passengers now fared indifferently, but the middle one, who was the Count, was comfortable enough.

Demidof, with his wife, met the party at the threshold of his

house, greeting them with voluble and exaggerated expressions of welcome, after the manner of Russian hosts of his day, which was about one hundred years ago.

"You see I have brought him," said Maximof; "make your bow, Sasha, and ask after the health of your *nevyesta* (bride)."

Sasha advanced shyly. "I hope Mademoiselle Vera Danilovna is well?" he said, glibly enough.

"She is well and waiting anxiously to embrace her fiancé," said Demidof, laughing. "Go into the salon on the right and you will find her—what? You have a present for her—a doll—that is delightful; she will love you from the very beginning. That is the door."

Sasha disappeared in the direction indicated.

"The notary is here," continued Demidof. "We can complete the legal part of the matter immediately; after which you, Father Nicholas, shall perform your share of the ceremony."

Parents, priest and notary now proceeded to the business of the occasion, which was the betrothal of Alexander Maximof, aged ten, to Vera Demidof, who numbered seven summers, and the signing of the contract of betrothal. When this latter document had been read over and approved and signed by all present, the two persons chiefly concerned in the matter were summoned for the religious ceremony; little Vera came hugging her doll, while Sasha was arrayed in a tiny Lancer uniform, the gift of his bride-to-be.

The priest recited certain prayers and injunctions to which

the principals paid scant attention; and, the ceremony ended, all sat down to dinner. At this function there were many servants, serfs of the estate, to wait upon the feasters; the food was good and plentiful, but badly cooked, the wine plentiful also, but indifferent, and the plates and dishes were filthy. Civilisation had not as yet reached a high standard in the Russia of that day, when, even in the best houses, though the furniture might be gorgeously gilt, it stood in dust and dirt; where men- and women-servants slept in the passages which were not aired during the day; where there were no arrangements for personal ablutions, and ventilation and sanitation were arts as yet undiscovered and undreamed of.

The two mothers gushed over their children, who chattered and played together quite unconcerned to think of the serious nature of the function in which they had this day taken a chief part. It was a beautiful thing, Countess Maximof observed, to see innocent love actually in the birth, as at this moment. The fathers drank heavily and made boisterous jokes at which all present laughed aloud, including the servants and his reverence the priest, who drank as hard as any and gave no sign of displeasure when the humour of the two manor-lords surpassed in its vulgarity even the wide margin which, in those days of much breadth in such matters, was considered permissible.

More than once Demidof rose to chastise some unfortunate serf who had in some manner displeased him. Neither of the gentlemen hesitated to use language towards the servants,

whether male or female, too outrageous to be imagined, far less quoted, applying names and epithets of the most unsavoury and insulting nature.

"You are too kind and gentle with your fellows," said Maximof, who was, even in those dark days of tyrannous and brutal manor-lords, a noted bully towards his serfs, and was hated by them in consequence even more bitterly than he himself was aware. "You should send that clumsy devil to me for a week, I'd train him for you."

The clumsy devil referred to had spilt wine over his master's arm and had received a clout over his head for his carelessness. He now stood lamenting audibly by the sideboard.

"You may have the fool," laughed Demidof, "for five roubles, and train him or bury him as you please."

"Oh no, no, Barin, God forbid," cried the wretched man sinking upon his knees, "it is unlawful to sell me away from the land."

"Good—I take him—send him over to-morrow!" Maximof hiccoughed, totally unconcerned by the fellow's blubbering and entreaties, to which his own master paid no more attention than the Count did.

When dinner was over the afternoon was well spent and it was time to set out upon the twenty-mile drive which separated the houses of the two boyars. The children were made to kiss one another at parting, a demonstration to which the lady strongly objected though without assigning a reason until after her future

lord's departure, when she explained to her mother's superstitious horror, but to her father's boisterous amusement, that she hated him.

"He kicked me and hit me," she said, showing certain marks upon her limbs, "because I was tired of playing at soldiers with him and wanted to hug my doll. Don't invite him here again, mother!"

"But he belongs to you, my dove, you must love him, he is yours and you are his," cried the horrified parent.

"Then I'll spill wine over him and he shall sell me for five roubles, as father sold Gregory just now!" said the child. Whereat the mother crossed herself and muttered a prayer and the boyar laughed boisterously.

Meanwhile the Maximof family sped homewards through the gloom of the early winter evening. The cold had a sobering influence both upon the boyar himself and upon the priest, who was with difficulty aroused from torpor, however, when his village was reached and the time came to drop him at his own house.

The driver, Kiril, had found friends at Demidof's house anxious to entertain him in return for his dismal accounts of the cruelties and abominations practised by his boyar upon the serfs of his estate.

"We are dogs, no better," he had told them; "you may thank God, brothers, that you are not in our place."

"Go on and tell us all about it," said one, plying Kiril with

more drink. Kiril had many a tale to tell at the price of a drink for each recital, and when true stories failed him he employed his inventive powers.

"You, Gregory, had better hang yourself rather than come our way," said he, addressing the man sold in a fit of rage by Demidof at the dinner-table.

"There is no need," said Gregory. "My master is not a fool when he is sober; he knows two things, one that he cannot sell me away from the land and the other that I am worth more than five roubles to him. He will remember these two things when he has slept, and I shall not go."

"Good; so be it; remain and be happy! What in the devil's name does your master think of to mate his child with the whelp of a wolf? Like father like son; one day he will eat her."

"In twelve years much may happen. Drink, friend, and tell us more of the doings of your master, who must indeed be a very child of Satan, if all you say is true."

"It is true. Listen now how he knouted Masha, the herdsman's daughter; some lords have respect for the weakness of a woman, but he has none."

Kiril was still narrating and still drinking when summoned to put in the horses and start homewards. By this time he was far from sober.

On the way home he slept peacefully, the clever little horses knowing the road homewards and keeping faultlessly to the track.

The priest had been left at his house and there remained but

four or five miles to drive when the astute little animals suddenly shied with one accord, sending the sledge skidding across the road and bringing it up violently enough against a pine-tree.

Maximof was rudely awakened from his sleep. His wife uttered a cry of alarm, the boyar swore loudly and thumped Kiril on the back. Young Sasha cried out incoherently and pointed among the trees on the right.

Kiril's head was sunk upon his breast; he snored in a drunken stupor and took no notice of the Barin's blows, which did not want for energy.

"See, father, wolves!" cried Sasha excitedly. "I have seen six, there is a seventh—oh—eight—nine!"

Maximof looked about. "It is true," he said, "they follow us."

"Husband, is there danger? Whip up the horses, Kiril!"

"Kiril is drunk and useless, he will not wake," replied the Count; "I will try other means." He took the whip and stood up to belabour the wretched sleeper about the neck, face and shoulders.

Kiril awoke with a roar of pain and drunken rage; he turned in his seat and struck savagely at his master, swearing horrible oaths.

"Sit down and hold the reins, you fool," shouted Maximof. "There is a pack of wolves at our heels."

There was something in the Barin's aspect at this moment that gave the drunken man pause. It was not the thought of the wolves, for he never glanced at them. He ceased to swear and rave and sat

down obediently to drive. Five minutes later the fellow was asleep again, the reins dangling. By this time the wolves had grown more daring; several had left the cover of the forest and followed the sledge in the open moonlight, going at a hand-gallop, grey and lank and weird enough to see. There were still two miles to go. A gaunt beast suddenly sprang out at the off horse, causing both animals to shy violently across the road.

Sasha uttered a cry of terror; the Countess caught her husband's arm; Kiril half awoke and joggled the reins.

"The wolves will attack us before we reach home. We are lost, husband," said the Countess.

"Take the reins from Kiril, Sasha," said Maximof, standing up. The boy obeyed, taking the reins from the sleeper's nerveless hands. Then Maximof suddenly caught Kiril by the waist and pulled him backwards. The Count was a large and powerful man, the other was a wisp in his arms. Kiril awoke and struggled. He caught the box-board with his heels, but Maximof kicked them free. Kiril struck at him and cursed, but feeling himself being forced over the side of the sledge he clutched with his hands and held on.

"Husband, what are you doing?—the wolves—the wolves!" shrieked the Countess. But her husband replied laughing that there were many trees, the fool could climb one if he was not too drunk. "Take the butt of the whip and strike his hands," he added, but his wife only shrieked and clung feebly to his arm.

Maximof forced one of the hands away and contrived by

a united effort of arms, legs and body to expel the wretched Kiril from the sledge. But the other hand clung desperately for a moment as the man was dragged along. Maximof kicked it free.

There was a shriek, and in the moonlight each wolf seemed to make for one point in the road. Then came a scrimmage and a tumult of snarling and fighting, and now the sledge was out of sight and hearing. It went on its way without further pursuit, save for one or two stragglers who soon found that their comrades had chosen the wiser course, and went back in hopes of being in time for a share of such good things as the gods had provided.

That night an old hag from the village came to the mansion to inquire for her son Kiril. From the servants she learned no certain thing, but each had suggestions to make as to Kiril's non-arrival. The story of Sasha's nurse was grimly suggestive. When going to bed Sasha had shown off his new Lancer uniform, and, being in a boastful mood, had volunteered the information that he had held the reins while father and Kiril were fighting.

"Why did they fight?" asked the nurse, but Sasha had suddenly remembered that his mother had bidden him remain silent as to this episode, and he replied that he did not know. "Kiril was drunk," he said, "I know that."

Presently the hag found her way into the presence of her manor-lord and accused him, shrieking, of the murder of her son.

"To the wolves you threw him," she cried, "deny it if you can!"

Maximof laughed; he rang the bell and bade his servants take her to the flog room and see that she had her full twenty strokes.

"They that throw to the wolves shall to the wolves be thrown!" shrieked the woman as she was removed; but Maximof laughed and bade the servants add five strokes. Presently he rang again in order to ask whether his orders had been obeyed.

"To the letter, Barin," said the trembling serf; "twenty-five strokes; after her punishment, being unable to walk, she was carried away to the village."

"Good," said Maximof; "if any serf repeats the words she has spoken this night, he shall receive a double punishment."

As a matter of fact the hag had been allowed to go unknouted. "It is enough to have lost your son," her pitying fellow serfs had told her; "go quickly and remain lying and groaning to-morrow, in case the steward calls to make sure."

"Those that throw to the wolves shall themselves feel the teeth of the wolves," murmured the old hag as she took her departure, and the saying was repeated broadcast among the villagers next day, in spite of the manor-lord's threats, for this old hag had some reputation as a *znaharka*, or wise woman, and her curses and blessings were matters of considerable interest to the peasantry around.

CHAPTER II

Maximof employed an agent to do the dirty work of the estate; he rarely came personally in contact with his people and scarcely knew the names of any of them. Kakin, the agent, was no better liked by the peasants; he was a bully, and rarely failed to improve when he could upon the severity of his master's measures towards them. A week after the events above recorded Barin and agent sat together in the estate office over the weekly consultation, when the question of the intended marriage of a serf came up for discussion, a man of the name of Ivan Patkin.

"He may marry whom he pleases in his own village," said the Count. "Who is the woman?"

"Timothy Drugof's daughter Olga, in this village," said Kakin; "Ivan of course lives at Drevno." This was a village within the boundaries of Maximof's estate, but seven miles at least from the manor-village of Toxova, in which Olga lived with her father.

"Tell the fool to marry a woman in Drevno or remain a bachelor," said the Count; "you know very well and so do the peasants that I will have no intermarrying amongst the villages."

"I will stop the proceedings then. I told the fellow of your objection, but he was impertinent—I will not tell you what he said."

"You should have given him the knout; do I pay you wages to sit and listen while my peasants use improper language towards

their Barin?"

"I gave him the knout; but he is, as you may know, a sulky devil, and, instead of doing him good, the flogging caused him to abuse and threaten me to my face; I was somewhat afraid of the man; he is not one to meet alone in the forest on a dark night."

"Afraid of a serf? You forget, my friend, that by the admission you may endanger your position; for if you show yourself useless to me we must part. My authority must be absolute and you are my representative. As for this marriage," the Count ended, "I do not desire that Olga should leave this village—she is useful at the manor-house."

"I will do my best," said the agent. He did not mention that Ivan Patkin and his friends at Toxova had practically turned him out of the village with contemptuous words and threats directed not only against himself but also against the Count; nor that the peasants had interfered at the very beginning of Ivan's flogging and had rescued him by force.

"Tell the Barin to interfere with Ivan's marriage if he dares!" one of the peasants had said. "We would deprive him of no rights; we both are and remain his serfs and live upon his land; he loses nothing if one of us goes from one village to another!"

The agent's way of "doing his best" in this matter was discreet. Knowing that the day fixed for Ivan's wedding was the following Saturday at Drevno, this being Thursday, he contrived to be absent for two days in a distant part of the estate; so that when a deputation of peasants from Drevno came over to fetch the bride

early on Saturday morning, he was not in the village to prevent them.

Ninety-nine times out of a hundred the Barin would have been unaware in such a case of the disobedience of his people; but it so happened that the girl Olga was required that day at the manor-house in order to act as substitute for one of the servants, who fell ill. Thus Olga's absence was remarked and commented upon and Maximof himself happened to be at hand and heard the fact mentioned.

"Where is the wench then?" he asked.

The woman who had been into the village to fetch Olga replied that the peasants had told her it was Olga's wedding-day and she had gone to Drevno to be married.

"What?" roared the outraged Barin; "married?—to whom?"

"To a peasant in that village," replied the trembling messenger, "one Ivan Patkin."

"Where is Kakin—why has he allowed the wench to go?" asked the Count, almost speechless with rage. Then he remembered that the agent was away collecting fines and duties in other villages.

"Let Kiril put the horses to," he roared; "I will go myself."

Some one tremblingly reminded the lord that Kiril was dead.

"Some other fellow then," he roared.

Maximof took his knout, an ugly leathern whip of many tails, and paid a visit—while waiting for his sledge—to the parents of Olga, who protested with tears that the agent had never told them

of the Barin's desire that Olga should not be married out of her own village.

"As if we should dare to disobey the Barin's will," they cried. "It is not even as though we had wished the wench married there; naturally we would rather keep her in Toxova, near ourselves—but go she would!"

Maximof laid about him freely with his knout; he spared neither age nor sex, and the cries which arose from the household included those of Olga's grandparents as well as her parents, and of the children small and large. All wept and scolded in a body when the Barin had departed, blaming one another and the agent and the Barin himself, but principally Olga, for bringing this trouble upon them.

"There is Peter Kuzmin in this village," they cried, "who would have had her; but no, nothing would do but to marry Ivan Patkin, who is a devil, not a man! If the Barin fetches her back, she shall marry Peter without delay. Are we all to suffer again for her sins?"

Meanwhile the village of Drevno was *en fête*. The bride and bridegroom drove hither and thither, from house to house, receiving congratulations and presents, and drink flowed freely. The wedding ceremony would take place early in the afternoon, if the priest condescended to turn up in time. He was not one to put himself out, however, for a mere marriage of serfs. Maidens walked about the village singing the dirges and melancholy songs which are or used to be a recognised prelude to the marriage of

one of their companions. In these songs all the possible sorrows and troubles of matrimony are reviewed, and the poor bride is reminded again and again that she is plunging into a bottomless sea of woe and would have done far better to keep out of the married state.

In some cases the bride accompanies this cheerful band, taking part with the maidens in foretelling her own troubles by singing the solo verses, which consist of a repetition of the dismal prophecies with her own acquiescence thrown in. But Olga preferred to drive around with Ivan of whom she was extremely fond; for this—strange to say—was a love-match, a rare thing indeed in those days and among the serfs, whose marriages were usually arranged for them by their manor-lord with a view to the particular needs of any portion of his estate in the matter of population.

Olga was merry this day and happy. She knew very well that there might be trouble; that the Barin would be displeased and would cause old Kakin to threaten all manner of pains and penalties. But in Drevno the peasants were not afraid of Kakin; they knew well enough that he dared not fulfil his threats, and that he would prefer to report to his master that certain floggings had been inflicted than actually inflict them. As for the Barin himself, he rarely came to the village. The people of Toxova lived, as it were, under his eye; but at Drevno it was different, and the peasants consequently enjoyed a certain measure of independence, won for themselves and by themselves out of

Kakin, the agent, whom they had successfully intimidated.

Even the Barin, Olga knew, could not unmarry her, once the church had performed the rite; neither could he separate husband and wife, though he might compel Ivan to transfer himself to Toxova.

It was a quarter to two when the Barin came swinging into the village at a hand-gallop, his three-horsed sledge—or *troika*—travelling at a splendid pace over the hard snow road. The wedding was to take place at two and Olga was now being dressed by her maidens at the house of Ivan's parents. The melancholy songs were in full chant; the bride and chorus were all, as the occasion demanded, in tears; every girl wailing and sobbing and singing as they decked their companion for the solemn rite.

Count Maximof drove straight to the Starost's house; this was the elected chief-peasant of the village, and the Barin put up his trap here, leaving with Gavril, the driver, a message for the Starost that if he were too late and the marriage should have taken place against his wishes and commands, the entire population should be not only fined but flogged also.

The Starost sent over for Ivan Patkin, the bridegroom, and communicated to him the disturbing news: the Barin had arrived to stop the wedding. The Starost was a sturdy independent man, like the rest of the Drevno villagers; he was entirely on Ivan's side in the matter.

"But the Barin is the Barin," he observed, "and the priest will obey him. He has gone straight to Father Michael's. What is to

be done?"

Ivan Patkin stood and cursed and fingered the axe which hung at his belt. He was anxious to marry Olga, to whom he was sincerely attached. This fatal-looking hitch at the last moment was maddening. His eyes seemed to grow red in a sudden access of rage and of hatred for the Barin.

"I will kill the devil," he said. "The old men tell us that the peasants of the next estate rose against their Barin, who oppressed them, and slew him, and that the Tsaritsa Catherine closed her eyes. Let us do the same."

"No," said the Starost; "that is going too far, Ivan. The Tsar Paul is not like his mother and the laws are different also. Disappear in the forest with Olga, if you will, and be married to-morrow, or to-night after the Barin has gone. You will be knouted, no doubt, and fined, but you will have Olga."

Ivan was too wild with rage to argue quietly. "I see there is no help to be got from you," he said, and he withdrew hastily to take counsel with others. On his way through the village he met the Barin himself returning from his visit to the priest whom he had abused and threatened and browbeaten until the unfortunate cleric began to fear that the furious man would end by knouting him, but Maximof dared not raise his hand to beat the priest, though his fingers itched to flog some one. It was at this moment that he met Ivan.

Ivan, though furious, nevertheless removed his cap upon encountering his master. The peasant in him was too strong.

Away from the Barin he would have told himself that he would not only not salute the Count if he should meet him, but that he would fall upon him and strangle the tyrant. In the Barin's presence he was cowed and his independence and courage vanished, though not his hatred.

"Who are you?" said the angry Count.

"Ivan Patkin," replied the man.

Then the Barin fell upon him, raining abuses and curses and knout-blows; and in a moment the wretched peasant was upon his knees blubbering and beseeching, rage in his heart, but in his veins the craven blood distilled by generations of oppression.

"Come to Toxova for a flogging once a month for a year," said the Barin, panting with his exertions; "and when you come Olga shall come also. I will show you both, and the rest of the village too, that I am to be obeyed. As for marrying, you shall marry the oldest hag in your own village, since you will have a wife."

Count Maximof felt somewhat relieved, but he continued his walk to the house wherein the bride had been dressed for her marriage. He found her alone, deserted by her maidens—who had fled from the wrath to come—and he flogged her without pity and without regard for her shrieks and her appeals for mercy.

Then, his anger somewhat appeased, he repaired to his estate office and bade them bring him tea, sending a message to Gavril, the driver, that he would return as soon as the horses should be sufficiently rested. Olga might return in his sledge, he added, with fine generosity; she deserved to be made to walk through

the forest night or no night, but he would let her drive in mercy.

CHAPTER III

The horses had brought their master to Drevno at a hand-gallop, and required some little time for resting. It was half-past four before the *troika* drove up to the door, and quite dark. Olga sat huddled up on the box-seat beside the driver and she was still crying, her body heaving at regular intervals with deep-drawn sobs.

The Barin, having been obliged to wait for more than two hours in the close, hot room which served as his agent's office, was sleepy; he settled himself comfortably in the sledge, well wrapped in furs, and presently dozed off. Soon he was snoring loudly.

"Olga," the driver whispered, "don't be startled and make a noise—I am Ivan."

Olga did start, and that violently; she would have cried out, too, but Ivan placed a great gloved hand upon her mouth and prevented her.

"Ivan, he will awake and recognise thee, and we shall be knouted as we sit," she whispered presently, when he had removed his hand. "Why did you come, and where is Gavril?"

"Gavril lies drunk in the Starost's stable; he has had more than his share of the wedding *vodka*; I made him drunk in order to take his place. And I have come because—do not be a fool and cry out—because the devil behind us has lived long enough; as

it has not been our wedding-day it shall be his death-day."

"Ivan, you dare not—you must not. He is a devil, as you say, but to murder him would do us no good. The Tsar's officers would come and take you from me and carry you away to Siberia, and what should I do then?"

"Bah! they must catch us first. We have these horses. We will drive all night by the roads, so as to leave no track, and we will come to the village of Ostrof, where I have relatives; they will take us in."

"And then?" said Olga, trembling so that she could scarcely speak.

"Their Barin will not ask questions; he will have us registered as his own and there is an end."

"But he must know why we have fled from our own Barin; he will ask and require to be satisfied."

"We will say that he was a devil and beat us, and that we would bear with him no longer."

"Do not shed blood, Ivan," said Olga. "I should fear you all my life long."

"Bah! to slay such vermin is to do God's service; do not be a timid fool, Olga; we cannot live without one another; is not that a certain thing?"

"That is certain; but I would rather love you without fearing you–" Olga's speech was interrupted at this moment by the sudden shying of the shaft horse, a movement which caused her to grab the narrow board on which she sat and Ivan to collide

violently against her, so that both nearly toppled out of the sledge. It caused the Barin to awake suddenly, also, and to launch at Ivan's head a string of curses and abuse.

Ivan remained silent, rather than apologise in the cringing phraseology of Gavril, for he did not wish to be recognised at present.

But the Barin's drowsiness was not yet slept off, and in a minute or two he was fast asleep again, and snoring.

"Olga, do you know what the horse shied at?" whispered Ivan.

"No," said the girl; "unless it was a shadow in the moonlight."

"Keep a guard upon your lips and I will tell you; it was a wolf. At this moment I can count five, taking both sides of the road; watch between the trees a hundred paces from the road; you will see them creep from shadow to shadow, keeping pace with us."

"Holy Mother of God!" exclaimed Olga, piously crossing herself; "yes—I see them—Lord have mercy upon us. I cannot forget Kiril who died but a week ago!"

"Do not fear," said Ivan; "these wolves may yet prove to be our best friends."

Olga pondered in silence over this enigmatical utterance of Ivan's. She concluded at length that he must have meant it would be dangerous to stop in order to murder the Barin, as he had threatened to do, and that therefore the wolves must be regarded as good friends having thus prevented the intended crime. The discovery gave Olga much comfort.

"The wolves are more and more," said Ivan presently, "and

they come in closer and closer to the road. There are at least a score, or it may be thirty; doubtless it is Kiril's pack."

"Lord save us!" ejaculated Olga.

"Bah! if there were three hundred there would be no danger behind these good horses—I would race the brutes from now until daylight!" said Ivan. "There is nothing to fear, Olga, only hold tightly to your seat."

Olga shuddered, but did as she was bidden. The wolves, as Ivan said, increased every moment in numbers and in audacity. They made no sound, but they cantered nearer on each side of the road, but twenty paces from the sledge, while others followed behind. The three horses, harnessed abreast, snorted with terror; they laid back their ears and dragged the light sledge at a hand-gallop. Ivan was a practised whip—every Russian peasant is—and controlled the pace at his desire. The Barin slept heavily on.

"How many there are, and how bold they grow!" whispered Olga. "Are you sure we are safe, Ivan?"

"Only hold on tightly," said Ivan hoarsely. A moment later he added:—

"Now, especially, hold on very tightly, Olga, with both hands; there is a bit of rough road here, and we may jolt."

Almost at the instant the off runner of the sledge struck the stem of a pine-tree which stood at the very edge of the road. The vehicle lurched heavily, glided perilously for a moment on one runner, then righted itself. The frightened horses started away at full gallop.

Olga, in spite of having clutched her seat with both hands, was thrown sidelong against Ivan, who grabbed her with his left arm, while with his right leg he touched and shoved off from the ground; this it was that righted the sledge. As the horses dashed forward both Ivan and Olga jolted back into their places, Olga shrieking with terror, but gripping the board upon which she sat so tightly as to be perfectly secure. Ivan sat still, looking neither to right nor left. He seemed to employ all his energies in getting the horses once more under control. They had travelled thus, at lightning speed, for two hundred yards, a distance which was covered in a quarter of a minute, before a shriek from behind caused Olga to cease, suddenly, her own screaming and look round.

"The Barin—the Barin!" she cried. "He has fallen out, Ivan! —stop the horses—we must save him!"

"Stop them who can—do not speak foolishness, Olga; you see that I am pulling with all my strength!"

Olga kept silence. There followed a second scream from behind; then a cry that seemed to be broken off in the middle.

Ivan took off his boots and threw them in the road. "Do the same, Olga," he said.

Olga obeyed, but half understanding. A few wolves were still following the sledge, but most had remained behind.

"Throw your coat also," said Ivan, "and your head kerchief!"

All these garments were afterwards found by the horrified persons who went out to look for the Barin, together with the

heels of the Count's boots, and a few shreds of his clothes. Olga's boots and Ivan's were in pieces and partly eaten, and her coat and red cotton headkerchief were in shreds.

"This is where the Barin fell out," said the searchers; "the two others clung to the sledge a little longer, it appears, before being thrown out and pulled to pieces. It is horrible!"

But many of the peasants in Maximof's villages were of opinion that the Barin's fate was well deserved. He had been a tyrant and oppressor of the poor. "It is the finger of God!" they said. Why two innocent peasants should have been sacrificed at the same time was a puzzling factor in the matter. As for the sledge it was duly brought back by the three hungry horses next day.

"Dear Lord, look at them!" said the peasants at Toxova; "they have run half a hundred miles—chased by wolves throughout the night, only think of it! And the sledge empty behind them—bah! it is horrible!"

The new master at Ostrof asked no questions. He registered Ivan and Olga by the names they chose to give him. Two new serfs were a godsend not to be despised. It was as though some one had paid in an unexpected sum to his credit at the banker's!

And the reputation of the old hag at Maximof's manor-village increased wonderfully from this day. Her blessing upon crops, marriages and so forth doubled at once in value; while as for her curses, why, from this time onward until she died, if she but launched a malediction, the victim might as well go and hang

himself for all the pleasure life would afford him until the wise woman was pleased to withdraw it.

CHAPTER IV

For many a year after the tragic death of his father the new manor-lord, little Sasha Maximof, would not be induced to live at the estate. He was afraid of the woods, wherein for ever lurked, according to his morbid fancy, hoardes of ravening wolves intent upon his destruction; he was afraid of his serfs, a feeling originated and fostered by his mother, who was herself afraid of them, well knowing the hatred they had borne towards her husband and fearing lest their malice should be extended towards his child. She desired no more than Sasha to live in the country. The property was placed in the hands of a steward—somewhat more merciful than deposed Kakin—who contrived to extract a fat living for the widow and her son by exploiting their unfortunate serfs to the utmost limit permitted by the law. The Countess lived with Sasha in St. Petersburg where he saw little or nothing of his "betrothed" for two or three years, after which little Vera Demidof was sent to Paris to be educated in a French school. Vera's aunt, Demidof's sister, had been married to the French Minister at the Court of the Emperor Paul, after whose tragic end he had left the country and returned to Paris, taking with him his Russian wife. Demidof was proud of his French relations and was glad enough to allow his child to receive her education under such promising auspices.

At the age of sixteen Vera returned to St. Petersburg quite

prepared to find her countrymen and women little better than barbarians as she had been taught by the elegant Parisian folk to believe them.

"Bears, *chérie*, you will find them, every one," her French relations assured her; "they have no manners and no education, how should they? and your fiancé, he will be a bear like the rest, you will run from him, run back to France; we shall find you a fiancé who is not a bear!"

"Bear or no bear, we are pledged to one another and there will be no running away from him!" said Vera. Whereat her French relatives shrugged their shoulders and said, "This betrothal of babes, what does it signify? It was a very pretty game for children, but a thing to be forgotten when the doll is put away and the skirts are lengthened."

"In Russia they think differently," Vera replied. "My mother looks upon the betrothal as binding, I know. The law and the Church both would have something to say before the contract could be broken."

"Well, let us see first what he is like; if he should be an impossible, without doubt both the Church and the law will listen to reason. What, are two people to be bound to one another for life if they desire it not? God forbid!"

"Maybe we shall both desire it when we meet, who knows?" Vera laughed. "We are talking in the dark, since Sasha and I have not met for many years. But if each is repulsive to the other the contract may perhaps be set aside, by mutual agreement."

"That is sensible," said Vera's aunt; "the danger is lest he shall be attracted by you, while you feel no counter-attraction for him, or *vice versâ*."

"I will keep a guard upon my heart, aunt," laughed Vera.

The first meeting, after many years, between the young people took place soon after this conversation at the annual reception of the corps of cadets in St. Petersburg. This corps consisted of members of the *petite noblesse*—the boyarin families of Russia, destined for military service in the more aristocratic regiments. The Emperor Paul, shocked by the methods of his mother, Catherine the Great, in the matter of distribution of commissions to the sons of her boyars, had instituted this corps of cadets as a much-needed measure of reform, and indeed the step was taken not a moment too soon for the good of the country.

As the great Catherine's system of distributing commissions to the members of that class of her subjects which seems to have been her *enfant gâté*, the *petite noblesse*, is somewhat unique, I will ask permission to digress for a moment in order to give the reader some idea of her method and of the abuses to which it gradually led.

The thing developed gradually and attained the height of absurdity only when the Empress was an old woman.

Commissions in the Guards were at this time regarded as gifts from the sovereign to her faithful boyars and claimable by every boyar, if he so desired, for the benefit of his children. They were issued on demand, and were not, at first, applied

for until the youth destined to enjoy the privilege had reached a time of life when a commission in the army might fairly be given to him; but since the officers of the Guards received liberal pay and were treated with marked kindness and indulgence by the sovereign, it occurred to certain boyars that it would be a pity to waste several years of the best part of the lives of their sons, years which might be spent so profitably in drawing pay and accumulating seniority in the Guards. Therefore certain aspiring parents applied for commissions for their sons at the age of fifteen; and—no objection being made—it soon became the custom to issue commissions to lads of this age.

Gradually the limit of age decreased. First commissions were demanded for boys of twelve, and obtained; then the age dropped to ten, then to eight, to six, to three. No duties were required of all these young officers, who were not even obliged to draw their own pay; their fathers were permitted to do this for them. But promotion proceeded in each case with regularity, and soon it was a common thing to see a promising young officer of seven years toddling at his mother's side in the epaulettes of a captain of the Guards.

But the matter did not end here. It now became the fashion to apply for commissions for male children as soon as born. Lieutenants were to be seen carried about in their nurses' arms and captains rode in perambulators, while majors and colonels of ten and twelve strutted about the streets, to the pride and no small profit of their happy parents. One would suppose that the

comedy had at this point reached the very limit of absurdity; but this was not so.

It occurred to some ingenious boyar about to enter into the delights and responsibilities of wedlock to apply for commissions for a son or two in advance. If his marriage should be blessed with offspring—well; if not, well also; for no one would be likely to inquire into the matter as long as the old Empress lived, and the pay of two or three officers of the Guards—non-existent, certainly, but steadily rising in rank for all that—would be a comfortable addition to the income of his parents that might have been.

This was the millennium of Catherine's *enfants gâtés*, the boyars, and it came to an end with her death and the accession of Paul, who had long watched the scandal from his retreat at Gatchina and watched it with helpless displeasure and anger. Paul was a strict disciplinarian and the sight of the degradation of the Guards maddened him. One of his first acts after his accession was to hold a review of the corps, a review at which every officer was compelled to be present or to hand in his resignation.

That must indeed have been the weirdest parade upon record. Officers in arms, officers in perambulators, officers clinging to their mothers' skirts; shy and self-conscious majors of ten wandering helplessly about the Champs de Mars, colonels of twelve and fourteen asking one another to which regiment they belonged, and the stern, angry Emperor surveying the motley scene as the executioner eyes his victim before dealing the fatal

stroke which is to end him once and for all.

In spite of his anger, the Tsar Paul displayed some humour upon this occasion, perhaps with the intention of impressing upon all witnesses the absurdity of the prevailing state of affairs. Every officer was called upon to take his proper place with his own battalion, and to obey the words of command presently issued by the few remaining veterans of the various regiments.

Naturally the parade began and ended in confusion; a wild medley of nursemaids and perambulators, of crying children and bewildered boys; all officers who were unable to perform the duties expected of them were called upon to resign their commissions, and with this historic review the millennium of Catherine's baby-guards came to a timely end.

Young Sasha Maximof, Vera's betrothed, had been duly enrolled, like most of his fellows of boyar rank, among Catherine's officers of the sinecure regiments, but his mother, unlike many of the parents of those young warriors, had taken neither fright nor offence at the action of the Emperor Paul, but like a sensible woman had entered her son's name as a cadet in the newly organised institution for the education of youths desirous of entering the army as *bona-fide* officers. Sasha had been but six years old at the time of the catastrophe, and had then enjoyed the rank and pay of a captain. He had, of course, resigned his commission, but had rejoined as a cadet of the Imperial Corps upon reaching the age of fourteen. He was now nineteen and one of the seniors of the establishment—a nice-looking youth of

medium height and good appearance. If one may use a modern expression to describe Sasha's attitude towards life at this time, he may be said to have "fancied himself" to a very considerable extent; he was, indeed, a fair example of the Russian youth of his day, when over the uncouth and bearlike manners of the old Muscovite type was gradually stealing the veneer of Western civilisation.

Sasha Maximof was a lady's man; he was generally liked and admired by the women, and knew it. He had already been through several *affaires du cœur*, and if he ever recollected the fact that he was a betrothed man, it is probable that he thought lightly of the matter, regarding the whole question as one of expediency. The dower to be had with his fiancée was a handsome one, he knew; but there were plenty of good dowers available for a man like himself; he might eventually decide to regard his engagement as binding—it depended upon the girl; mediocrity would not suit him.

"It will be a wonder, or rather *she* will have to be one," he remarked one day when his mother, observing his attitude towards some damsel whom he was accustomed to meet in society, casually reminded him of the existing contract to which he was a party. "She will have to be a wonder if that silly betrothal is to come to anything!"

CHAPTER V

Little sixteen-year-old Vera Demidof looked very well in her stylish Parisian clothes. She was a pretty girl of true Russian type, and, Russian like, was an adept in the art of keeping up a constant flow of light talk, half in her native language and half in French, a fashion in polite society then as now. Vera was with her mother, and with them stood or moved about among the crowd of visitors at the annual function of the corps of cadets a young cousin, one Constantine Demidof, a youthful member of the corps.

"Tell me the notables," said Vera, "especially the military ones, but don't expect me to admire any of our poor Russians after the smart-looking French officers! As for your cadets—bah!—you are bigger than the French, perhaps, but clumsier; and your manners compared with theirs—the cadets here, I mean—oh! you are bears, my friend, and they are angels. Imagine, Constantine, *mon ami*, I have spoken to Ney—the bravest of the brave—only think of it; and one day the Emperor himself, beautiful man, smiled upon me."

"Oh, come," said Constantine, "if you speak of emperors and beautiful men, your Napoleon is a mere tub-man, and not to be named in comparison with our Emperor. You have not yet seen Alexander? A very different person from his unbeautiful father Paul, wait and see, he will be here in five minutes. Your Sasha Maximof is to receive a prize at his hands, lucky Sasha!"

"Sasha a prize—oh, I am glad!" exclaimed Vera—"and for what?"

"For fencing; he is the best fencer of all here; see, he is still busy with that girl, his latest craze; in charity we will hope that he has not yet seen you."

"If he did, I think he would not recognise me; he does not know I am here and it is five years since we met. Presently you shall go and bring him to me, but not yet. Tell me, Constantine, is Sasha liked here?"

Constantine glanced at his cousin; he caught her eye and smiled.

"Some people like him, I suppose," he said.

"Of whom Constantine Demidof is evidently not one," said Vera, laughing merrily. "Why not, my friend?"

"How should I? I scarcely know him, he is two years senior to me here, and that means much."

"I see. I should say, to look at him, that he has a good opinion of himself."

"Oh, he certainly has that," Constantine laughed. "He is thought good-looking, you know, and the girls flatter him, I suppose."

"Nevertheless his clothes fit very badly. In Parisian clothes he might look well, yes, he is not bad; you shall bring him to me, presently, but do not say who I am; you shall say that there is a lady who desires to have him presented to her."

At this moment the Emperor Alexander entered the room,

preceded by an aide-de-camp, who first cleared the space about the doorway in order that his Majesty might enter with effect, which he certainly did.

The Emperor was a splendid-looking man, tall and straight as a pine stem, and handsome withal; there was perhaps but a single man in all Russia who was his superior in manly bearing and in stately presence, and that was his younger brother and successor, Nicholas, who had not his equal in Europe.

"Oh, he is splendid!" murmured Vera Demidof, gazing in wonder and admiration—"what a man! Oh, the sight of him makes me proud to be Russian after all!"

"Ha! it is good to hear you praise something which is not French. Your 'little Corporal' would look but a poor creature beside him, come, admit it!"

"Bah! one thinks of something else than inches when one sees Napoleon; nevertheless in the Tsar Alexander God has made a very fine man; they speak well of him in Paris as a wise ruler."

The Emperor now made a short speech to the cadets, after which he distributed the prizes, saying a word or two of praise or encouragement to each successful candidate. Sasha Maximof returned to his place, flushed and self-conscious, holding the sword of honour which the Tsar had presented to him with a word of approbation.

"How proud he looks!" said Vera; "I am glad he has won it and that he has been a success here."

Afterwards, when the Tsar and his suite had departed, she sent

young Constantine to fetch Sasha to her side, in order that she might renew her acquaintance with him.

"Don't say who it is," she called after him as he moved away, somewhat unwillingly, to obey her behest. Constantine adored his cousin and would far rather have had her to himself.

"A lady wishes to have me presented?" said Sasha, frowning slightly. "Well, I'll come presently; I am busy entertaining another lady, as you perceive;—stop, which is she?"

Constantine pointed Vera out.

"What, that child?" exclaimed Maximof. "Tell her I have no time to talk to children."

"She isn't a child, and it's not likely I will give such a message," said Constantine angrily. "If you knew–" he paused.

"Well—what?"

"If you knew who she is," stammered Constantine, "you'd go to her."

"Why, is she anybody very particular?" asked the other, devoting a second and more interested glance in Vera's direction.

"You can only learn all about her by becoming personally acquainted with her," said the younger lad. "She *is* somebody rather particular."

"Well, I'll come, if I can, later; there are so many who want to speak to one on an occasion like this."

Sasha Maximof's companion had listened with amusement to this conversation; she, too, had glanced at Vera and had recognised her instantly, for the circumstances of the betrothal

of these two were a matter of common knowledge.

"I see you are looking at the young lady who desires my acquaintance," said Sasha, when Constantine had departed; "do you happen to know who she is?"

"Do you seriously mean to say that you do not?" asked the girl, laughing.

"I'm afraid I cannot recall her name, though I believe I have seen the face somewhere; one does not take special notice of children; I cannot imagine why she should be any one in particular, as that little fool declared. Of course one knows every one who *is* any body! Well, who is she?"

"First tell me, do you consider her pretty?"

"Passable—but of course a mere child; she may improve and may go the other way. She's Russian, of course?"

"Certainly, but has been absent from Russia for five years. Her clothes are of the last French mode—she has French relations—have I shed light liberally enough to illuminate your intelligence?"

"She is Vera Demidof, you mean; I did not know she had returned. Well, she has come too soon, she is a child, I will say neither yes nor no to her until I can judge of her when full grown." Sasha flushed and looked aggrieved. His companion laughed.

"You are not a very ardent fiancé," she said. "Remember, it is your duty to love her; she will expect to be greeted radiantly, to hear words of endearment, delight at her unexpected return, and so forth; compose your features, my friend, you are frowning;

look pleased, ardent, full of affection, and so go and do your duty."

"You speak foolishly; it is not for *you* to bid me perform this foolery, you who know that my heart contains but one image. You must be aware that my betrothal is a mere farce, a thing to be shaken off as easily as assumed. I shall speak to the girl—courtesy demands it, but I shall pretend no affection."

"Poor child, she will be heart-broken; see how lovingly she gazes at you even now!"

Sasha looked, but Vera's gaze did not strike him as being aptly described by the word "loving"; on the contrary, though she turned her head when she observed that she was watched, he was in time to surprise what appeared to him to be an indignant rather than a languishing expression.

As a matter of fact Vera was very angry indeed. Constantine had returned to her shy and shamefaced.

"Well—is he coming? What did he say?" she had asked.

"His vanity is terrible," said Constantine, "and his manners are even worse."

"How—what do you mean—does he recognise me and refuse to renew our acquaintance?"

"Oh no, he did not suspect who you were. He said you were a mere child and hinted that he had no time to waste upon children."

"Children!" repeated Vera indignantly; "and I in my seventeenth year! Bah—he has, as you say, no manners. So he

has refused to be presented."

"Not quite that! 'I will come, if I can, later,' he said; I think he is much absorbed, at present, by the lady at his side; it is a different one, with him, every month."

"I will wait for half an hour, and then, if he comes not, you shall take me away, Constantine," said Vera; and though the lad at her side protested against her doing Maximof so much honour, she insisted upon staying.

Presently, however, seeing that Sasha showed signs of crossing the room in order to approach her, she said quickly:—

"See, Constantine, now he comes; when it is quite clear that his intention is to speak to me, I will rise and you shall give me your hand to escort me away!"

"Good," exclaimed her cousin delightedly. "Yes, that's the way he should be treated—see, he is approaching—come!"

The two young cousins rose and passed down the room, almost meeting Sasha Maximof, who stopped, obviously expecting them to do the same. "Demidof," he said, "be so kind as to present me to your friend."

Vera passed on, taking no notice whatever. Constantine looked round, over his shoulder.

"You will have to wait now, my friend, until she is a little older," he said, and Vera pinched his arm with delight.

"Bravo, cousin," she said, "that was splendid."

"It was rather daring," said Constantine, somewhat ruefully, "to a senior cadet; I don't know what will happen to me."

Sasha returned to his charmer, who, unfortunately, had witnessed his discomfiture.

"You've met your match, my friend!" she laughed; "she's decidedly pretty, too, when one sees her closely."

"She's an impudent little minx at any rate," said Sasha, laughing also, though somewhat artificially, and at the same time flushing hotly; he was not used to rebuffs from the fair sex. "By such conduct—revealing a tendency to bad manners—she commits *felo de se* as regards—well—a certain object she has in view."

On the way home Vera, following up some train of thought, remarked to her cousin that it was a pity Sasha Maximof was so good-looking; to which Constantine replied that he did not see much to admire in the fellow.

CHAPTER VI

The Boyar Demidof, though not by profession a diplomat, had procured for himself an appointment as Attaché to the Embassy in Paris, in order to be near his daughter as well as his married sister. Vera's presence in St. Petersburg was in the nature of a flying visit. She would return with her mother to Paris in a month or two.

During that period she saw little of Sasha Maximof. He called upon the Demidofs once or twice, but was obviously but little attracted by Vera, whom he treated as a child, and from whom he did not attempt to conceal the fact that he had on hand more than one *affaire de cœur* and that he thought but little, if anything, of the contract entered into by their respective fathers when both of the principal parties were too young to understand the nature of the proceedings.

Vera began by treating Sasha with much hauteur, desiring to punish him for his indifference; but when it became clear to her that he cared nothing whether she bore herself haughtily or kindly, and was, indeed, very little interested in her, she began, with the inconsistency of human nature, to realise that whether she would have it so or no her interest in him grew, and with it the recognition that the young man was undoubtedly very good-looking and had a certain attractiveness about him. Before Vera returned to Paris Sasha Maximof had quite made up his mind

that he was far too good to waste himself upon the commonplace little person his father had seen fit, without consulting his wishes, to select for his partner in life. He intended to do much better. The Countess, his mother, was inclined to agree with him. He consulted her upon the question as to whether a contract of marriage so made was binding or not.

"If both parties desire to annul it," the Countess thought, "surely no one would compel them to hold to it."

"The question is," said Sasha, "*will* the girl agree to annul it? The match is a good one, from her point of view; I don't suppose there's much harm done yet, in a personal way, I mean, for we have scarcely met and I certainly have not gone out of my way to be in any way attractive to her."

"Go and see the girl and talk it over with her," suggested the Countess, and this advice Sasha presently followed.

He called upon Vera and plunged quickly into the business on hand, though he began somewhat diffidently, for, though in speaking with his mother he had taken for granted that the girl could scarcely have fallen in love with him yet, Sasha, in the secret realms of his inner consciousness, was by no means so assured of the matter; indeed, he was strongly of opinion that no girl could see him and pass entirely unscathed through the ordeal.

Somewhat to his disgust he could detect no sign of regret or disappointment in Vera's attitude; on the contrary, he was not at all sure that she was not as anxious as himself to be relieved from the foolish obligation imposed upon both of them as children.

"I never could understand what was the object of our honoured fathers in making so foolish an arrangement," said Sasha; "my idea is that living down in the wilds as they did, they were so put to it for amusement that they invented this as a pastime; it would be interesting, they thought, to watch our affection bud and blossom and so on; but of course, as you know, my father died and neither my mother nor I ever lived in the country again, while you went to Paris. Of course if we had met constantly, living close to one another, and never seeing any one else, it might have been different."

Vera suddenly burst out laughing at this point.

"You mean that if neither of us had ever met any other young people besides our two selves we might one day have come to like one another? Believe me, Alexander Petrovitch, I am far from being so conceited as to suppose you could ever have learned to admire me. Is this, then, your theory: that if, for instance, a man and a woman were thrown together upon a desert island, they would be bound eventually to fall in love with one another? On the contrary, I should think they would soon be wearied to death by one another's society."

"I did not mean that at all," said Sasha, flushing rather angrily, for it occurred to him that his *amour propre* was in some way being attacked. "I meant that if we had seen more of one another than we have, it might have been quite a different matter. You might have liked me, which I see is not now the case, and of course I might have fallen in love with you."

"Which also is certainly not the case as any one might perceive," laughed Vera.

"I am not pretending that it is; I could not very well."

"For after all I am a mere child," she said.

"I see you cannot forgive me that expression. Why should it offend you? You are not fully grown up. However, I apologise for using it if you dislike it. Well now, I think I have made my meaning clear; I do not love you—indeed, I may tell you that I have fallen in love elsewhere, for which you can scarcely blame me, since you have never given me the opportunity to lose my heart where our revered parents desired that it should be lost; and of course the same may be said of you; you have had no opportunity of learning to like me."

"For which I certainly ought to be most grateful," said Vera, "under the circumstances. How terrible if one of us had fallen in love and the other not! If it had been I, I must have sacrificed my heart's happiness, for of course I could not well have admitted the pathetic truth. You would have gone away and never known!"

"Well, at any rate, we are fortunately quite agreed upon the subject," replied Sasha, who was not enjoying the conversation and wished it over. "And since we *are* agreed that the betrothal was a mistake and that we shall both be happier if we annul the agreement and go upon our respective ways in life in pursuit of our respective ideals of happiness, I now suggest to you that the foolish document be torn up."

"By all means," said Vera; "tear it up, if you have it."

"Yes, I have it. I am sorry, Vera, that things should have turned out as they have; neither of us is to blame. As I said before, if we had seen more of one another–"

"It would have been an exceedingly dangerous thing for *me*, is that what you would imply?" asked Vera, laughing.

The girl looked so handsome as she said the words, her eyes aflame and a heightened colour lending a wonderful charm to her somewhat pallid Russian complexion, that Sasha stared for a moment in surprise before he answered.

"It might have been dangerous for either of us," he said; "for though you *are* only a child, you are a very pretty one."

Vera curtsied pertly and laughed. "In every way the document is a horribly dangerous thing then," she said; "destroy it by all means, Alexander Petrovitch. You will now have a free hand with the lady whose name you have not mentioned. How relieved she will be to hear that I have given you a certificate of discharge."

"As to that," replied Sasha, flushing, "every one who knows of our betrothal laughs at it. Two persons thus bound, they say, would be sure to loathe one another long before the time came to marry, simply because they *are* bound."

"But we agreed just now that if we had seen more of one another, each would probably have found the other irresistible," Vera laughed; "let us hold to this pleasant conclusion, it is more flattering to both of us than the other. We will leave it at this, that I might have stood well in your regard, one day, but for the fact that another lady stands better, having supplanted me in

time. As for yourself, except for my good fortune in being a mere child, I must, of course, have lost my heart at first sight, this, I understand, being the usual fate of my sex."

"You are pleased to jest, Mademoiselle Vera," said Sasha, uncertain whether to feel elated or angry. "It is time I departed; until the contract is destroyed we are still betrothed; may I kiss your hand?"

"The betrothal ended at the moment of mutual agreement. Farewell, Alexander Petrovitch, and a happy ending to your courtship."

"That girl will grow up into a lovely woman," thought Sasha as he strode away; "but what a little tigress she looked more than once. She is angry with me for wishing to annul the contract."

"I don't see why it should be actually destroyed," he reflected later, fingering the document. "Why not keep it in case of accidents? A year or two hence I may be heart free, and she may be uncommonly handsome—I think the paper may remain for the present."

He put it back in his desk and sat thinking.

"The little devil was laughing at me all along," he said presently; "it was pique, simply pique. She'll be a pretty woman, that's certain!"

As for Vera, she felt forlorn and unhappy. She was not in the least in love, but for better or worse she had been accustomed lifelong to look upon this man as her husband-to-be, and now the air-castle had fallen in ruins. There was a sudden gap, an empty

space in her life, and she felt lonely and deserted.

She actually cried over the matter and this did her a world of good. "He's certainly good-looking," was the conclusion she now arrived at; "but, as Constantine said, his vanity is terrible. I don't think I could have borne it!"

CHAPTER VII

A well-known establishment in a suburb of Paris, in the early part of last century, was the fencing-school of old Pierre Dupré, *maître d'armes* and retired Major in the French army. Old Pierre was growing somewhat old for the personal exercise of his art, but he could still superintend the practice of his pupils, who fenced with his assistants, and give such advice as they could receive from no other swordsman in all Paris.

Of assistants he had four, one a fine young fellow named Karl Havet, the second an equally excellent exponent of the beautiful art he taught, one Georges Maux. The other two helpers were, strange to say, females, strapping fine girls, both, and splendid swordswomen, old Pierre's daughters.

How it befel that his girls had become such adepts in their father's profession, and why, are matters easily explained.

It had been the greatest grief to the old man and a bitter grievance against destiny when, at the birth of his first child, he learned that he was the father of a girl. When the second and last child made its appearance and proved, like its sister, to be of the wrong sex, he was in despair. He had longed for a son to train in the use of arms which he should wield in his country's honour.

"Bring them up as boys," some one suggested, "they are fine girls both of them, and would make splendid boys."

From the moment that this idea took root in his mind, old

Pierre found consolation. He adopted the suggestion *in toto*. The girls, while still young children, were dressed as boys, taught as boys, treated as boys, and perhaps almost, though not quite, loved as boys. From the earliest day upon which their little hands could hold and manipulate a rapier, he taught them to fence, and now—at the age of nineteen and twenty—the girls—Louise and Marie—could hold their own with almost any swordsman in Paris.

Though no longer dressed in male attire, old Pierre's daughters still wore garments as nearly allied to the fashion of those worn by men as was consistent with propriety. The girls looked as like men as handsome girls could look; they associated entirely with men, talked and thought like men, were men to all practical purposes, excepting in one particular: their women's hearts remained to them. One, Marie, was engaged to marry young Karl Havet, to whom she was devotedly attached, much to the chagrin of her father, who regretted Marie's "weakness" as a sad falling away from the state of grace to which his daughter had attained. To have been brought up as a man and to have reached the point of perfection, or near it, in the most manly of all exercises, and then to exhibit the weakness of a silly woman by falling in love—"Bah!" said old Pierre, in speaking of it to his friends, "it is sad—it is cruel—it is incredible!"

Nevertheless, the evil existed and must be recognised and put up with. The pair were engaged and within a month they would marry.

As for the second daughter, Louise, her father's favourite,

his pride and joy—for not only was she a little taller, a little stronger, a little more skilful with the rapier than her sister, but also possessed the crowning glory, in his eyes, of a deep contralto speaking-voice, which added a point to her score of manly virtues—Louise, too, though Pierre guessed it not, had fallen a victim to the universal weakness of womankind; she, too, had lost her heart to a man. Louise did not tell her father this; she did not even tell Marie, her sister; it is probable that she did not whisper it even to her own heart of hearts, and yet she knew well that it was so: she was in love.

After all, it was no wonder that she should have become attracted by one or other of the many handsome and manly youths who came either to learn to fence or to practise the art, already learned, by engaging in a set-to with one of Pierre's accomplished daughters. Louise was acquainted with half a hundred of the most attractive young officers in Paris. Nearly every one of Napoleon's marshals had visited Pierre's establishment, nay, even the Emperor himself had been there and had laughed and applauded the skill of the two *demoiselles d'armes*. He had spoken to Louise and praised her to her face which was nearer the sky than his own by four inches at least.

Yet never, until a certain afternoon in this very year of 1812, had Louise been conscious of the quickening of her pulses in response to the instincts of womanhood; for though assuredly there were many of the gilded youths of her acquaintance who had wasted upon her the eloquence of the eye, of the whispering

lips, of the tightened hand—all these things had left Louise as they found her, calm and unmoved, and wondering, maybe, at the foolishness of men who could waste time upon such silly matters as love-making and love-talking.

The fatal afternoon was that upon which young Baron Henri d'Estreville first visited the fencing establishment in order to see for himself the skill of the two girls with whose fame as swordswomen all Paris was ringing.

The Baron was himself a first-class swordsman, but in fencing a bout with Louise he distinctly had the worst of it, a fact which he was himself the first to admit.

This was a good-looking youth, merry and debonair, an officer in a Lancer regiment and the first cousin of one with whom we are already acquainted, Vera Demidof. He spoke with Louise both before and after the fencing match, and for some reason or another he took her fancy as no other man had done. D'Estreville was no exception to the rule of young men of his age. Louise was a woman, young and handsome, and of course the Baron employed against her all the artillery he possessed. Louise had thought this sort of thing only silly in others; but the whispered words, the meaning looks, the pressure of the hand appeared very charming when these measures were employed by her new friend.

The Baron said he would come again.

"You beat me handsomely to-day," he laughed, "but next time I intend to turn the tables; ah, Mademoiselle, it was not the rapier

that overthrew me to-day, but the light of your eye, the beauty of your face–"

To his bosom friend and constant companion, Paul de Tourelle, the Baron said, "You must come down to Pierre Dupré's fencing establishment and see those girls of his fence. Also you should see Louise's eyes and complexion—by all that's bewitching, they are splendid! You shall admit it! As for her fencing–"

Young Paul de Tourelle laughed. "Yes, you shall take me to see them," he said; "I am anxious to know whether their skill is really so great as it is said to be by their admirers. As for her eyes and the rest of it, that sort of thing is not likely to have much effect upon me just now, for reasons well known to you."

"Poor Paul! nevertheless come and see; when a man is so hard hit as you seem to be this time, to gaze upon something equally attractive may do him good, just as a change of air is beneficial to a sick man."

"Equally attractive! beware what you say, my friend; such words savour of disrespect towards—some one; there is no one equally attractive, and cannot be; you speak of impossibilities."

"I retract the words," said the Baron, laughing; "we will say that here is a personality displaying remarkable attractions, falling short, however, of the highest. Joking apart, she is a splendid woman, strong as a man, handsome as one of the Graces, and she fences—well—even the great exponent Paul de Tourelle must look to his laurels if he measures swords with her."

"*Âme de mon Épée!* is it so?" exclaimed Paul, flushing; Paul was acknowledged to be one of the finest, if not the very first swordsman in France. "That is a thing which I cannot afford to have said of any man, still less of any woman. I will come and see, my friend, and if she is willing we will try a bout."

"She will be willing; fencing is the breath of life to her; but seriously, if you fear that your reputation might suffer by defeat, you must do your best, Paul; she is a supreme mistress of the art."

"Fear not; I will remember to be careful!" laughed the other.

When the Baron visited the establishment of old Pierre on the following day he found the fair Louise somewhat inclined to avoid him, or at any rate less disposed to play the *bon camarade* than on the previous occasion. This attitude was the direct result of a conversation between old Pierre and his daughter Marie.

"I am no longer the black sheep, *mon père*," said Marie, laughing. "This day Louise has also shown that she is a woman."

"What mean you?" asked the old man, looking up startled from his occupation.

"Hitherto Louise has been with our visitors as a man among men; this day, in the presence of Monsieur le Baron, she has behaved as a woman in the presence of the man who is her soul's affinity."

"I'll not believe it of her," said old Pierre angrily; "because *you* have been a fool, Marie, and proved yourself no wiser than other silly women, you would have me believe that Louise can be equally foolish. I will speak to Louise; she shall belie your

accusation."

Louise did belie it, but with blushing and much confusion. Possibly her father's words were the first intimation to her heart that it was no longer fancy-free.

The conversation left her very thoughtful, however, and very silent; and when the Baron arrived with De Tourelle and other friends on the following day, he found her—as has been said—somewhat inclined to give him the cold shoulder.

CHAPTER VIII

At D'Estreville's second visit to old Pierre Dupré's he was accompanied by Paul de Tourelle and by Vera Demidof, now a beautiful girl of nineteen. The Baron was proud of his pretty cousin, between whom and his friend Paul a considerable friendship had lately sprung up.

In so far as De Tourelle was concerned, his sentiments towards Vera differed, as he had found to his surprise, from those he had ever experienced before this time towards any member of the fair sex. Up to the day upon which he had first made acquaintance with Vera Demidof, Paul had looked upon women as toys created for the delectation and amusement of mankind; he was always glad to play with them, to have his pleasure in their society, but not to take them seriously. He had always found young women in his own class charmed to meet him upon his own ground; to excurse with him as far as he was pleased to go into the pleasant glades of love-making, but to take him no more seriously than he chose to be taken.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.