CHAPTER X.

On they flew.

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

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

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

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

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

Besides, she felt sure that Zina need only show herself in society, with her mamma to support her, and every one of all those countesses and princes should very soon

either acknowledge her of their own accord, or yield to the head-washing that Maria Alexandrovna felt herself so competent to give to any or all of them, individually or collectively.

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

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

Lights were burning inside.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Besides, everyone knows how great a contrast there is between the sweetness and refinement shown by many ladies of a certain class on the stage, as it were, of society

life, and the revelations of character behind the scenes at home; and I was anxious to bring out this contrast for my reader's benefit.

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

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

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

“You won't catch cold!”

“But—mammy, my hair's quite wet!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maria Alexandrovna could not believe her ears.

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

“But—mammy—I must know, you know——”

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

The frightened consort held his peace.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Tfu! idiot. I thought you were going to say something of terrific interest, from the look of you. Dream, indeed! How dare you mention your miserable dreams to me! Original, too! Listen here: if you dare so much as remind me of the word ‘dream,’ or say anything else, either, where we are going to-day, I—I don't know *what* I won't do to you! Now, look here: Prince K. has arrived at my house. Do you remember Prince K.?”

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

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

“Well, but if I'm asked anything?”

“Hold your tongue all the same!”

“Oh, but I can't do that—I can't do——”

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

“H'm.”

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

“H'm.”

“I don't want you to say ‘H'm’ *now*, you fool! You must answer *me* when I speak!”

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

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

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

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

“I understand, mam—Maria-Alexandrovna.”

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

“H'm.”

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

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

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

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

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

“H'm, and if *other* people ask me questions?”

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

“What, a witty sort of smile, is it, mammy?”

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

“H'm.”

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

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

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

Maria Alexandrovna's heart sank.

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

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

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

Maria Alexandrovna could neither believe her eyes nor her ears.

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

CHAPTER XI.

Mosgliakoff went out from Maria Alexandrovna's house to all appearances quite pacified. She had fired his ardour completely. His imagination was kindled.

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

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

And yet—(I really cannot explain this phenomenon, however!)—and yet, no sooner did the first flush of this delightful sunrise of future delights pass off and fade away, than the annoying thought struck him: this is all very well, but it is in the future: and now, to-day, I shall look a dreadful fool. As he reflected thus, he looked up and found that he had wandered a long way, to some of the dirty back slums of the town. A wet snow was falling; now and again he met another belated pedestrian like himself. The outer

circumstances began to anger Mosgliakoff, which was a bad sign; for when things are going well with us we are always inclined to see everything in a rose-coloured light.

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

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

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

Mosgliakoff was not in a pretty humour at this moment.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, how are you, uncle?” asked Mosgliakoff.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“How? When?”

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

“I know, uncle: that was early this morning!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Why uninhabited, uncle?” asked Mosgliakoff, absently.

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

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

Suddenly the old man made an exclamation of surprise.

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

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

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

“Excuse me, uncle; but *when* did you make this offer?”

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

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

“And *whom* did you propose to?” he asked impatiently.

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

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

“Ye—yes, I'm sure of it; I—I——.”

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

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

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

“Why, wh—what then?”

“I am convinced that you were dreaming.”

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

“You see, uncle, you had a drop of wine for lunch, and then another drop or two for dinner, don't you know; and so you may easily have——”

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

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

“Ye—yes, ye—yes.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Ye—yes, of course; most dangerous!”

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

“No!”

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

“Ye—yes, quite so, dig—nity!”

“And wisdom,—and amiability——”

“Quite so; wis—dom—wisdom!”

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

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

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

“Guests? dear me! I—I——”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Well, *au revoir*, uncle! I'm going down, now, and you——”

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

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

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

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

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

“No, no, uncle! Heaven forbid!”

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

“Yes, uncle. Why?”

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

“You'll remember afterwards, uncle! *au revoir!*”

“*Au revoir*, my boy, *au revoir*—but, I say, it was a bewitching dream, a most be—witching dream!”

CHAPTER XII.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Especially, dear, as that delightful prince is with you just now. You know there is a private theatre in his house at Donchanof, and we have discovered that somewhere or other there, there are a lot of old theatrical properties and decorations and scenery. The prince was at my house to-day, but I was so surprised to see him that it all went clean out of my head and I forgot to ask him. Now we'll broach the subject before him. You must support me and we'll persuade him to send us all the old rubbish that can be found. We want to get the prince to come and see the play, too! He is sure to subscribe, isn't he—as it is for the poor? Perhaps he would even take a part; he is such a dear, kind, willing old man. If only he did, it would make the fortune of our play!”

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

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

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

Some of them came with the distinct intention of witnessing some scene of a delightfully scandalous nature, and were prepared to be very angry indeed if it should

turn out that they were obliged to leave the house without the gratification of their hopes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"But, but—why, mammy, you told me yourself"—began the bewildered and lost Afanassy. At this moment he was standing at the fireside with one hand placed inside

his waistcoat, in an artistic position which he had chosen deliberately, on mature reflection,—and he was sipping his tea. The questions of the ladies had so confused him that he was blushing like a girl.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Maria Alexandrovna trembled in her shoes.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“No, I've just been with uncle.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oho! so this is how you treat me, Maria Alexandrovna!” she shouted at the top of her voice. “Oh! don't be afraid, I shall not inflict myself upon you for more than a minute! I

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

"Evidently!" observed Natalia Dimitrievna.

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

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

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

"Oh, I know—you'll get your people to turn me out! Don't trouble yourself—I know the way out! Good-bye,—marry your daughter to whom you please, for all I care. And as for *you*, Natalia Dimitrievna, I will thank you not to laugh at me! I may not have been asked here, but at all events *I* did not dance a can-can for the prince's benefit. What may *you* be laughing at, Mrs. Antipova? I suppose you haven't heard that your *great*

friend Lushiloff has broken his leg?—he has just been taken home. Tfu! Good-bye, Maria Alexandrovna—good luck to you! Tfu!”

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

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

“But what audacity!”

“*Quelle abominable femme!*”

“What a raving lunatic!”

“But really, what excessively improper things she says!”

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

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

“The prince, the prince!” cried all the guests at once.

“Oh, oh, here he is—the dear, dear prince!”

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

CHAPTER XIII.

The prince entered and smiled benignly around.

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

Those gentle creatures received him with chirps and exclamations of joy. Ladies always petted our old friend the prince, and were—as a rule—wonderfully familiar with him. He had a way of amusing them with his own individuality which was astonishing! Only this morning Felisata Michaelovna had announced that she would

sit on his knee with the greatest pleasure, if he liked; “because he was such a dear old pet of an old man!”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Yes, yes, *mesdames*; I am going abroad almost im—mediately!”

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

“Yes—yes, abroad,” said the prince; “and do you know it is principally for the sake of the new i—deas——”

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Oh, I know, prince,” said Felisata Michaelovna—

“ ‘When the husband's away

The wife will play!”

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

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

“H'm!”

“Oh, he's quite well, thank you, prince, *quite* well,” answered Maria Alexandrovna quickly.

“Ye—yes, I see he is—he looks it! And are you still at the vill—age? Dear me, very pleased, I'm sure; why, how red he looks, and he's always laugh—ing.”

Afanassy smiled and bowed, and even “scraped,” as the prince spoke, but at the last observation he suddenly, and without warning or apparent reason, burst into loud fits of laughter.

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

It was time to change the conversation.

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

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

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

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

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

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

“Then it *must* be interesting, oh, *dreadfully* interesting,” cried other ladies.

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

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

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

“Of course, of course, prince.”

“Is she in this town?”

“Dear prince, *do* tell us.”

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

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

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

“Why, of course, the young lady who is considered the reigning beauty here,” remarked Natalia Dimitrievna, rubbing her hands and looking hard at Zina with those cat's-eyes of hers. All joined her in staring at Zina.

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

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

“Oh, dear prince, *do* marry!” chirped another.

“Marry, marry, *do* marry!” was now the cry on all sides.

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

“Uncle!” cried Mosgliakoff.

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

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

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

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

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

Some audacity was requisite for such a performance, of course; but Maria Alexandrovna had not even to put her hand in her pocket for a supply of that particular commodity.

“*Mesdames*,” she began, solemnly, and with much dignity (Maria Alexandrovna was always a great admirer of solemnity); “*mesdames*, I have been a listener to your conversation—to your witty remarks and merry jokes—long enough, and I consider that my turn has come, at last, to put in a word in contribution.

“You are aware we have all met here accidentally (to my great joy, I must add—to my very great joy); but, though I should be the first to refuse to divulge a family secret before the strictest rules of ordinary propriety rendered such a revelation necessary, yet, as my dear guest here appears to me to have given us to understand, by covert hints and insinuations, that he is not averse to the matter becoming common property (he will forgive me if I have mistaken his intentions!)—I cannot help feeling that the prince is not only not averse, but actually desires me to make known our great family secret. Am I right, Prince?”

“Ye—yes, quite so, quite so! Very glad, ve—ry glad, I'm sure!” said the prince, who had not the remotest idea what the good lady was talking about!

Maria Alexandrovna, for greater effect, now paused to take breath, and looked solemnly and proudly around upon the assembled guests, all of whom were now listening with greedy but slightly disturbed curiosity to what their hostess was about to reveal to them.

Mosgliakoff shuddered; Zina flushed up, and arose from her seat; Afanassy, seeing that something important was about to happen, blew his nose violently, in order to be ready for any emergency.

“Yes, ladies; I am ready—nay, gratified—to entrust my family secret to your keeping!——This evening, the prince, overcome by the beauty and virtues of my daughter, has done her the honour of proposing to me for her hand. Prince,” she concluded, in trembling tearful accents, “dear Prince; you must not, you cannot blame me for my candour! It is only my overwhelming joy that could have torn this dear secret prematurely from my heart: and what mother is there who will blame me in such a case as this?”

Words fail me to describe the effect produced by this most unexpected sally on the part of Maria Alexandrovna. All present appeared to be struck dumb with amazement. These perfidious guests, who had thought to frighten Maria Alexandrovna by showing her that they knew her secret; who thought to annihilate her by the premature revelation of that secret; who thought to overwhelm her, for the present, with their hints and insinuations; these guests were themselves struck down and pulverized by

this fearless candour on her part! Such audacious frankness argued the consciousness of strength.

“So that the prince actually, and of his own free-will is really going to marry Zina? So they did not drink and bully and swindle him into it? So he is not to be married burglariously and forcibly? So Maria Alexandrovna is not afraid of anybody? Then we can't knock this marriage on the head—since the prince is not being married compulsorily!”

Such were the questions and exclamations the visitors now put to themselves and each other.

But very soon the whispers which the hostess's words had awakened all over the room, suddenly changed to chirps and exclamations of joy.

Natalia Dimitrievna was the first to come forward and embrace Maria Alexandrovna; then came Mrs. Antipova; next Felisata Michaelovna. All present were shortly on their feet and moving about, changing places. Many of the ladies were pale with rage. Some began to congratulate Zina, who was confused enough without; some attached themselves to the wretched Afanassy Matveyevitch. Maria Alexandrovna stretched her arms theatrically, and embraced her daughter—almost by force.

The prince alone gazed upon the company with a sort of confused wonder; but he smiled on as before. He seemed to be pleased with the scene. At sight of the mother and daughter embracing, he took out his handkerchief, and wiped his eye, in the corner of which there really was a tear.

Of course the company fell upon him with their congratulations before very long.

“I congratulate you, Prince! I congratulate you!” came from all sides at once.

“So you *are* going to be married, Prince?”

“So you *really are* going to marry?”

“Dear Prince! You really are to be married, then?”

“Ye—yes, ye—yes; quite so, quite so!” replied the old fellow, delighted beyond measure with all the rapture and atmosphere of congratulation around him; “and I confess what I like best of all, is the ve—ery kind in—terest you all take in me! I shall never forget it, never for—get it! Charming! charming! You have brought the tears to my eyes!”

“Kiss me, prince!” cried Felisata Michaelovna, in stentorian tones.

“And I con—fess further,” continued the Prince, as well as the constant physical interruptions from all sides allowed him; “I confess I am beyond measure as—tonished that Maria Alexandrovna, our revered hostess, should have had the extraordinary penet—ration to guess my dream! She might have dreamed it herself, instead of me. Ex—traordinary perspicacity! Won—derful, wonderful!”

“Oh, prince; your dream again!”

“Oh, come, prince! admit—confess!” cried one and all.

“Yes, prince, it is no use concealing it now; it is time we divulged this secret of ours!” said Maria Alexandrovna, severely and decidedly. “I quite entered into your refined, allegorical manner; the delightful delicacy with which you gave me to understand, by means of subtle insinuations, that you wished the fact of your engagement to be made known. Yes, ladies, it is all true! This very evening the prince knelt at my daughter's feet, and actually, and by no means in a dream, made a solemn proposal of marriage to her!”

“Yes—yes, quite so! just exactly like that; and under the very cir—cumstances she describes: just like re—ality,” said the old man. “My dear young lady,” he continued, bowing with his greatest courtesy to Zina, who had by no means recovered from her amazement as yet; “my dear young lady, I swear to you, I should never have dared thus to bring your name into pro—minence, if others had not done so before me! It was a most be—witching dream! a be—witching dream! and I am doubly happy that I have been per—mitted to describe it. Charming—charming!”

“Dear me! how very curious it is: he insists on sticking to his idea about a dream!” whispered Mrs. Antipova to the now slightly paling Maria Alexandrovna. Alas! that great woman had felt her heart beating more quickly than she liked without this last little reminder!

“What does it mean?” whispered the ladies among themselves.

“Excuse me, prince,” began Maria Alexandrovna, with a miserable attempt at a smile, “but I confess you astonish me a great deal! What is this strange idea of yours about a dream? I confess I had thought you were joking up to this moment; but—if it be a joke on your part, it is exceedingly out of place! I should like—I am *anxious* to ascribe your conduct to absence of mind, but——”

“Yes; it may really be a case of absence of mind!” put in Natalia Dimitrievna in a whisper.

“Yes—yes—of course, quite so; it may easily be absence of mind!” confirmed the prince, who clearly did not in the least comprehend what they were trying to get out of him; “and with regard to this subject, let me tell you a little an—ecdote. I was asked to a funeral at Petersburg, and I went and made a little mis—take about it and thought it was a birthday par—ty! So I brought a lovely bouquet of cam—ellias! When I came in and saw the master of the house lying in state on a table, I didn't know where to lo—ok, or what to do with my ca—mellias, I assure you!”

“Yes; but, Prince, this is not the moment for stories!” observed Maria Alexandrovna, with great annoyance. “Of course, my daughter has no need to beat up a husband; but at the same time, I must repeat that you yourself here, just by the piano, made her an offer of marriage. *I* did not ask you to do it! I may say I was amazed to hear it! However, since the episode of your proposal, I may say that I have thought of nothing else; and I have only waited for your appearance to talk the matter over with you. But now—well, I am a mother, and this is my daughter. You speak of a dream. I supposed, naturally, that you were anxious to make your engagement known by the medium of an allegory. Well, I am perfectly well aware that someone may have thought fit to confuse your mind on this matter; in fact, I may say that I have my suspicions as to the individual responsible for such a——however, kindly explain yourself, Prince; explain yourself quickly and satisfactorily. You cannot be permitted to jest in this fashion in a respectable house.”

“Ye—yes—quite so, quite so; one should not jest in respectable houses,” remarked the prince, still bewildered, but beginning gradually to grow a little disconcerted.

“But that is no answer to my question, Prince. I ask you to reply categorically. I insist upon your confirming—confirming here and at once—the fact that this very evening you made a proposal of marriage to my daughter!”

“Quite so—quite so; I am ready to confirm that! But I have told the com—pany all about it, and Felisata Michaelovna ac—tually guessed my dream!”

“*Not dream!* it was *not* a dream!” shouted Maria Alexandrovna furiously. “It was not a dream, Prince, but you were wide awake. Do you hear? Awake—you were *awake*!”

“Awake?” cried the prince, rising from his chair in astonishment. “Well, there you are, my friend; it has come about just as you said,” he added, turning to Mosgliakoff. “But I assure you, most es—teemed Maria Alexandrovna, that you are under a del—usion. I am quite convinced that I saw the whole scene in a dream!”

“Goodness gracious!” cried Maria Alexandrovna.

“Do not disturb yourself, dear Maria Alexandrovna,” said Natalia Dimitrievna, “probably the prince has forgotten; he will recollect himself by and by.”

“I am astonished at you, Natalia Dimitrievna!” said the now furious hostess. “As if people forget this sort of thing! Excuse me, Prince, but are you laughing at us, or what are you doing? Are you trying to act one of Dumas' heroes, or Lauzun or Ferlacourt, or somebody? But, if you will excuse me saying so, you are a good deal too old for that sort of thing, and I assure you, your amiable little play-acting will not do here! My daughter is not a French viscountess! I tell you, this very evening and in this very spot here, my daughter sang a ballad to you, and you, amazed at the beauty of her singing, went down on your knees and made her a proposal of marriage. I am not talking in my sleep, am I? Surely I am wide awake? Speak, Prince, am I asleep, or not?”

“Ye—yes, of course, of course—quite so. I don't know,” said the bewildered old man. “I mean, I don't think I am drea—ming now; but, a little while ago I *was* asleep, you see; and while asleep I had this dream, that I——”

“Goodness me, Prince, I tell you you were *not* dreaming. *Not dreaming*, do you hear? *Not* dreaming! What on earth do you mean? Are you raving, Prince, or what?”

“Ye—yes; deuce only knows. I don't know! It seems to me I'm getting be—wildered,” said the prince, looking around him in a state of considerable mental perturbation.

“But, my dear Prince, how can you possibly have *dreamed* this, when I can tell you all the minutest details of your proposal and of the circumstances attending it? You have not told any of us of these details. How could I possibly have known what you dreamed?”

“But, perhaps the prince *did* tell someone of his dream, in detail,” remarked Natalia Dimitrievna.

“Ye—yes, quite so—quite so! Perhaps I did tell someone all about my dream, in detail,” said the now completely lost and bewildered prince.

“Here's a nice comedy!” whispered Felisata Michaelovna to her neighbour.

“My goodness me! this is too much for *anybody's* patience!” cried Maria Alexandrovna, beside herself with helpless rage. “Do you hear me, Prince? She sang you a ballad—*sang you a ballad*! Surely you didn't dream that too?”

“Certainly—cer—tainly, quite so. It really did seem to me that she sang me a ballad,” murmured the prince; and a ray of recollection seemed to flash across his

face. “My friend,” he continued, addressing Mosgliakoff, “I believe I forgot to tell you, there was a ballad sung—a ballad all about castles and knights; and some trou—badour or other came in. Of course, of course, I remember it all quite well. I recoll—ect I did turn over the ballad. It puzzles me much, for now it seems as though I had really heard the ballad, and not dreamt it all.”

“I confess, uncle,” said Mosgliakoff, as calmly as he could, though his voice shook with agitation, “I confess I do not see any difficulty in bringing your actual experience and your dream into strict conformity; it is consistent enough. You probably *did* hear the ballad. Miss Zenaida sings beautifully; probably you all adjourned into this room and Zenaida Afanassievna sang you the song. Of course, I was not there myself, but in all probability this ballad reminded you of old times; very likely it reminded you of that very vicomtesse with whom you used once to sing, and of whom you were speaking to-day; well, and then, when you went up for your nap and lay down, thinking of the delightful impressions made upon you by the ballad and all, you dreamed that you were in love and made an offer of marriage to the lady who had inspired you with that feeling.”

Maria Alexandrovna was struck dumb by this display of barefaced audacity.

“Why, ye—yes, my boy, yes, of course; that's exactly how it really wa—as!” cried the prince, in an ecstasy of delight. “Of course it was the de—lightful impressions that caused me to dream it. I certainly re—member the song; and then I went away and dreamed about my pro—posal, and that I really wished to marry! The viscountess was there too. How beautifully you have unravelled the diffi—culty, my dear boy. Well, now I am quite convinced that it was all a dream. Maria Alex—androvna! I assure you, you are under a delu—usion: it was a dream. I should not think of trifling with your feelings otherwise.”

“Oh, indeed! Now I perceive very clearly whom we have to thank for making this dirty mess of our affairs!” cried Maria Alexandrovna, beside herself with rage, and turning to Mosgliakoff: “You are the man, sir—the *dishonest* person. It is you who stirred up this mud! It is you that puzzled an unhappy old idiot into this eccentric behaviour, because you yourself were rejected! But we shall be quits, my friend, for this offence! You shall pay, you shall pay! Wait a bit, my dishonest friend; wait a bit!”

“Maria Alexandrovna!” cried Mosgliakoff, blushing in his turn until he looked as red as a boiled lobster, “your words are so, so——to such an extent—I really don't know how to express my opinion of you. No lady would ever permit herself to—to—. At all events I am but protecting my relative. You must allow that to *allure* an old man like this is, is——.”

“Quite so, quite so; *allure*,” began the prince, trying to hide himself behind Mosgliakoff.

“Afanassy Matveyevitch!” cried Maria Alexandrovna, in unnatural tones; “do you hear, sir, how these people are shaming and insulting me? Have you *quite* exempted yourself from all the responsibilities of a man? Or are you actually a—a wooden block, instead of the father of a family? What do you stand blinking there for? eh! Any other husband would have wiped out such an insult to his family with the blood of the offender long ago.”

“Wife!” began Afanassy, solemnly, delighted, and proud to find that a need for him had sprung up for once in his life. “Wife, are you quite certain, now, that *you* did not dream all this? You might so easily have fallen asleep and dreamed it, and then muddled it all up with what really happened, you know, and so——”

But Afanassy Matveyevitch was never destined to complete his ingenious, but unlucky guess.

Up to this moment the guests had all restrained themselves, and had managed, cleverly enough, to keep up an appearance of solid and judicial interest in the proceedings. But at the first sound, almost, of Afanassy's voice, a burst of uncontrollable laughter rose like a tempest from all parts of the room.

Maria Alexandrovna, forgetting all the laws of propriety in her fury, tried to rush at her unlucky consort; but she was held back by force, or, doubtless, she would have scratched out that gentleman's eyes.

Natalia Dimitrievna took advantage of the occasion to add a little, if only a little, drop more of poison to the bitter cup.

“But, dear Maria Alexandrovna,” she said, in the sweetest honied tones, “perhaps it may be that it really *was* so, as your husband suggests, and that you are actually under a strange delusion?”

“How! What was a delusion?” cried Maria Alexandrovna, not quite catching the remark.

“Why, my dear Maria, I was saying, *mightn't* it have been so, dear, after all? These sort of things *do* happen sometimes, you know!”

“*What* sort of things do happen, eh? What are you trying to do with me? What am I to make of you?”

“Why, perhaps, dear, you really *did* dream it all!”

“What? *dream* it! *I* dreamed it? And you dare suggest such a thing to me—straight to my face?”

“Oh, why not? Perhaps it really was the case,” observed Felisata Michaelovna.

“Ye—yes, quite so, very likely it act—ually *was* the case,” muttered the old prince.

“He, too—gracious Heaven!” cried poor Maria Alexandrovna, wringing her hands.

“Dear me, how you do worry yourself, Maria Alexandrovna. You should remember that dreams are sent us by a good Providence. If Providence so wills it, there is no more to be said. Providence gives the word, and we can neither weep nor be angry at its dictum.”

“Quite so, quite so. We can't be a—angry about it,” observed the prince.

“Look here; do you take me for a lunatic, or not?” said Maria Alexandrovna. She spoke with difficulty, so dreadfully was she panting with fury. It was more than flesh and blood could stand. She hurriedly grasped a chair, and fell fainting into it. There was a scene of great excitement.

“She has fainted in obedience to the laws of propriety!” observed Natalia Dimitrievna to Mrs. Antipova. But at this moment—at this moment when the general bewilderment and confusion had reached its height, and when the scene was strained to the last possible point of excitement, another actor suddenly stepped to the front; one who had been silent hitherto, but who immediately threw quite a different complexion on the scene.

CHAPTER XIV.

Zenaida, or Zina Afanassievna, was an individual of an extremely romantic turn of mind.

I don't know whether it really was that she had read too much of “that fool Shakespeare,” with her “little tutor fellow,” as Maria Alexandrovna insisted; but, at all events she was very romantic. However, never, in all her experience of Mordasoff life, had Zina before made such an ultra-romantic, or perhaps I might call it *heroic*, display as on the occasion of the sally which I am now about to describe.

Pale, and with resolution in her eyes, yet almost trembling with agitation, and wonderfully beautiful in her anger and scorn, she stepped to the front.

Gazing around at all, defiantly, she approached her mother in the midst of the sudden silence which had fallen on all present. Her mother roused herself from her swoon at the first indication of a projected movement on Zina's part, and she now opened her eyes.

“Mamma!” cried Zina, “why should we deceive anyone? Why befoul ourselves with more lies? Everything is so foul already that surely it is not worth while to bemean ourselves any further by attempting to gloss over the filth!”

“Zina, Zina! what are you thinking of? *Do* recollect yourself!” cried Maria Alexandrovna, frightened out of her wits, and jumping briskly up from her chair.

“I told you, mamma—I told you before, that I should not be able to last out the length of this shameful and ignominious business!” continued Zina. “Surely we need no further bemean and befoul ourselves! I will take it all on myself, mamma. I am the basest of all, for lending myself, of my own free will, to this abominable intrigue! You are my mother; you love me, I know, and you wished to arrange matters for my happiness, as you thought best, and according to your lights. *Your* conduct, therefore, is pardonable; but mine! oh, no! never, never!”

“Zina, Zina! surely you are not going to tell the whole story? Oh! woe, woe! I felt that the knife would pierce my heart!”

“Yes, mamma, I shall tell all; I am disgraced, you—we all of us are disgraced——”

“Zina, you are exaggerating! you are beside yourself; and you don't know what you are saying. And why say anything about it? The ignominy and disgrace is not on our side, dear child; I will show in a moment that it is not on our side!”

“No, mamma, no!” cried Zina, with a quiver of rage in her voice, “I do not wish to remain silent any longer before these—persons, whose opinion I despise, and who have come here for the purpose of laughing at us. I do not wish to stand insult from any one of them; none of them have any right to throw dirt at me; every single one of them would be ready at any moment to do things thirty times as bad as anything either I or you have done or would do! Dare they, *can* they constitute themselves our judges?”

“Listen to that!”

“There's a pretty little speech for you!”

“Why, that's *us* she's abusing”!

“A nice sort of creature she is herself!”

These and other such-like exclamations greeted the conclusion of Zina's speech.

“Oh, she simply doesn't know what she's talking about!” observed Natalia Dimitrievna.

We will make a digression, and remark that Natalia Dimitrievna was quite right there!

For if Zina did not consider these women competent to judge herself, why should she trouble herself to make those exposures and admissions which she proposed to reveal in their presence? Zina was in much too great a hurry. (She always was,—so the best heads in Mordasoff had agreed!) All might have been set right; all might have been satisfactorily arranged! Maria Alexandrovna was a great deal to blame this night, too! She had been too much “in a hurry,” like her daughter,—and too arrogant! She should have simply raised the laugh at the old prince's expense, and turned him out of the house! But Zina, in despite of all common sense (as indicated above), and of the sage opinions of all Mordasoff, addressed herself to the prince:

“Prince,” she said to the old man, who actually rose from his arm-chair to show his respect for the speaker, so much was he struck by her at this moment!—“Prince forgive us; we have deceived you; we entrapped you——”

“*Will* you be quiet, you wretched girl?” cried Maria Alexandrovna, wild with rage.

“My dear young lady—my dear child, my darling child!” murmured the admiring prince.

But the proud haughty character of Zina had led her on to cross the barrier of all propriety;—she even forgot her own mother who lay fainting at her feet—a victim to the self-exposure her daughter indulged in.

“Yes, prince, we both cheated you. Mamma was in fault in that she determined that I must marry you; and I in that I consented thereto. We filled you with wine; I sang to you and postured and posed for your admiration. We tricked you, a weak defenceless old man, we *tricked* you (as Mr. Mosgliakoff would express it!) for the sake of your wealth, and your rank. All this was shockingly mean, and I freely admit the fact. But I swear to you, Prince, that I consented to all this baseness from motives which were *not* base. I wished,—but what a wretch I am! it is doubly mean to justify one's conduct in such a case as this! But I will tell you, Prince, that if I had accepted anything from you, I should have made it up to you for it, by being your plaything, your servant, your—your ballet dancer, your slave—anything you wished. I had sworn to this, and I should have kept my oath.”

A severe spasm at the throat stopped her for a moment; while all the guests sat and listened like so many blocks of wood, their eyes and mouths wide open.

This unexpected, and to them perfectly unintelligible sally on Zina's part had utterly confounded them. The old prince alone was touched to tears, though he did not understand half that Zina said.

“But I will marry you, my beau—t—iful child, I *will* marry you, if you like”—he murmured, “and est—eem it a great honour, too! But I as—sure you it was all a dream,—what does it mat—ter what I dream? Why should you take it so to heart? I don't seem to under—stand it all; please explain, my dear friend, what it all means!” he added, to Paul.

“As for you, Pavel Alexandrovitch,” Zina recommenced, also turning to Mosgliakoff, “you whom I had made up my mind, at one time, to look upon as my future husband; you who have now so cruelly revenged yourself upon me; must you needs have allied yourself to these people here, whose object at all times is to humiliate and shame me? And you said that you loved me! However, it is not for me to preach moralities to you, for I am worse than all! I wronged you, distinctly, in holding out false hopes and half promises. I never loved you, and if I had agreed to be your wife, it would have been solely with the view of getting away from here, out of this accursed town, and free of all this meanness and baseness. However, I swear to you that had I married you, I should have been a good and faithful wife! You have taken a cruel vengeance upon me, and if that flatters your pride, then——”

“Zina!” cried Mosgliakoff.

“If you still hate me——”

“Zina!!”

“If you ever did love me——”

“Zenaida Afanassievna!”

“Zina, Zina—my child!” cried Maria Alexandrovna.

“I am a blackguard, Zina—a blackguard, and nothing else!” cried Mosgliakoff; while all the assembled ladies gave way to violent agitation. Cries of amazement and of wrath broke upon the silence; but Mosgliakoff himself stood speechless and miserable, without a thought and without a word to plead for him!

“I am an ass, Zina,” he cried at last, in an outburst of wild despair,—“an ass! oh far, far worse than an ass. But I will prove to you, Zina, that even an ass can behave like a

generous human being! Uncle, I cheated you! I, I—it was I who cheated you: you were *not* asleep,—you were wide awake when you made this lady an offer of marriage! And I—scoundrel that I was—out of revenge because I was rejected by her myself, persuaded you that you had dreamed it all!"

"Dear me, what wonderful and interesting revelations we are being treated to now!" whispered Natalia to Mrs. Antipova.

"My dear friend," replied the prince, "com—pose yourself, do! I assure you—you quite start—led me with that sudden ex—clamation of yours! Besides, you are labouring under a delusion;—I will marr—y the lady, of course, if ne—cessary. But you told me, yourself, it was all a dre—eam!"

"Oh, how am I to tell you? Do show me, somebody, how to explain to him! Uncle, uncle! this is an important matter—a most important family affair! Think of that, uncle—just try to realise that——"

"Wait a bit, my boy—wait a bit: let me think! First there was my coachman, Theophile——"

"Oh, never mind Theophile now, for goodness sake!"

"Of course we need not waste time over The—ophile. Well—then came Na—poleon; and then we seemed to be sitting at tea, and some la—dy came and ate up all our su—gar!"

"But, uncle!" cried Mosgliakoff, at his wits' end, "it was Maria Alexandrovna herself told us that anecdote about Natalia Dimitrievna! I was here myself and heard it!—I was a blackguard, and listened at the keyhole!"

"How, Maria Alexandrovna!" cried Natalia, "you've told the prince too, have you, that I stole sugar out of your basin? So I come to you to steal your sugar, do I, eh! do I?"

"Get away from me!" cried Maria Alexandrovna, with the abandonment of utter despair.

"Oh, dear no! I shall do nothing of the sort, Maria Alexandrovna! I steal your sugar, do I? I tell you you shall not talk of me like that, madam—you dare not! I have long suspected you of spreading this sort of rubbish abroad about me! Sophia Petrovna came and told me all about it. So I stole your sugar, did I, eh?"

"But, my dear la—dies!" said the prince, "it was only part of a dream! What do my dreams matter?——"

“Great tub of a woman!” muttered Maria Alexandrovna through her teeth.

“What! what! I'm a tub, too, am I?” shrieked Natalia Dimitrievna. “And what are you yourself, pray? Oh, I have long known that you call me a tub, madam. Never mind!—at all events my husband is a man, madam, and not a fool, like yours!”

“Ye—yes—quite so! I remember there *was* something about a tub, too!” murmured the old man, with a vague recollection of his late conversation with Maria Alexandrovna.

“What—*you*, too? *you* join in abusing a respectable woman of noble extraction, do you? How dare you call me names, prince—you wretched old one-legged misery! I'm a tub am I, you one-legged old abomination?”

“Wha—at, madam, I one-legged?”

“Yes—one-legged and toothless, sir; that's what you are!”

“Yes, and one-eyed too!” shouted Maria Alexandrovna.

“And what's more, you wear stays instead of having your own ribs!” added Natalia Dimitrievna.

“His face is all on wire springs!”

“He hasn't a hair of his own to swear by!”

“Even the old fool's moustache is stuck on!” put in Maria Alexandrovna.

“Well, Ma—arie Alexandrovna, give me the credit of having a nose of my ve—ry own, at all events!” said the prince, overwhelmed with confusion under these unexpected disclosures. “My friend, it must have been you betrayed me! *you* must have told them that my hair is stuck on?”

“Uncle, what an idea, I——!”

“My dear boy, I can't stay here any lon—ger, take me away somewhere—*quelle société*! Where have you brought me to, eh?—Gracious Hea—eaven, what dreadful soc—iety!”

“Idiot! scoundrel!” shrieked Maria Alexandrovna.

“Goodness!” said the unfortunate old prince. “I can't quite remember just now what I came here for at all—I suppose I shall reme—mber directly. Take me away, quick, my boy, or I shall be torn to pieces here! Besides, I have an i—dea that I want to make a note of——”

“Come along, uncle—it isn't very late; I'll take you over to an hotel at once, and I'll move over my own things too.”

“Ye—yes, of course, a ho—tel! Good-bye, my charming child; you alone, you—are the only vir—tuous one of them all; you are a no—oble child. Good-bye, my charming girl! Come along, my friend;—oh, good gra—cious, what people!”

I will not attempt to describe the end of this disagreeable scene, after the prince's departure.

The guests separated in a hurricane of scolding and abuse and mutual vituperation, and Maria Alexandrovna was at last left alone amid the ruins and relics of her departed glory.

Alas, alas! Power, glory, weight—all had disappeared in this one unfortunate evening. Maria Alexandrovna quite realised that there was no chance of her ever again mounting to the height from which she had now fallen. Her long preeminence and despotism over society in general had collapsed.

What remained to her? Philosophy? She was wild with the madness of despair all night! Zina was dishonoured—scandals would circulate, never-ceasing scandals; and—oh! it was dreadful!

As a faithful historian, I must record that poor Afanassy was the scapegoat this night; he “caught it” so terribly that he eventually disappeared; he had hidden himself in the garret, and was there starved to death almost, with cold, all night.

The morning came at last; but it brought nothing good with it! Misfortunes never come singly.

CHAPTER XV.

If fate makes up its mind to visit anyone with misfortune, there is no end to its malice! This fact has often been remarked by thinkers; and, as if the ignominy of last night were not enough, the same malicious destiny had prepared for this family more, yea, and worse—evils to come!

By ten o'clock in the morning a strange and almost incredible rumour was in full swing all over the town: it was received by society, of course, with full measure of spiteful joy, just as we all love to receive delightfully scandalous stories of anyone about us.

“To lose one's sense of shame to such an extent!” people said one to another.

“To humiliate oneself so, and to neglect the first rules of propriety! To loose the bands of decency altogether like this, really!” etc., etc.

But here is what had happened.

Early in the morning, something after six o'clock, a poor piteous-looking old woman came hurriedly to the door of Maria Alexandrovna's house, and begged the maid to wake Miss Zina up as quickly, as possible,—*only* Miss Zina, and very quietly, so that her mother should not hear of it, if possible.

Zina, pale and miserable, ran out to the old woman immediately.

The latter fell at Zina's feet and kissed them and begged her with tears to come with her at once to see poor Vaísia, her son, who had been so bad, *so* bad all night that she did not think he could live another day.

The old woman told Zina that Vaísia had sent to beg her to come and bid him farewell in this his death hour: he conjured her to come by all the blessed angels, and by all their past—otherwise he must die in despair.

Zina at once decided to go, in spite of the fact that, by so doing, she would be justifying all the scandal and slanders disseminated about her in former days, as to the intercepted letter, her visits to him, and so on. Without a word to her mother, then, she donned her cloak and started off with the old woman, passing through the whole length of the town, into one of the poorest slums of Mordasof—and stopped at a little low wretched house, with small miserable windows, and snow piled round the basement for warmth.

In this house, in a tiny room, more than half of which was occupied by an enormous stove, on a wretched bed, and covered with a miserably thin quilt, lay a young man, pale and haggard: his eyes were ablaze with the fire of fever, his hands were dry and thin, and he was breathing with difficulty and very hoarsely. He looked as though he might have been handsome once, but disease had put its finger on his features and made them dreadful to look upon and sad withal, as are so many dying consumptive patients' faces.

His old mother who had fed herself for a year past with the conviction that her son would recover, now saw at last that Vaísia was not to live. She stood over him, bowed down with her grief—tearless, and looked and looked, and could not look enough; and felt, but could not realize, that this dear son of hers must in a few days be buried in the miserable Mordasof churchyard, far down beneath the snow and frozen earth!

But Vaísia was not looking at her at this moment! His poor suffering face was at rest now, and happy; for he saw before him the dear image which he had thought of, dreamed of, and loved through all the long sad nights of his illness, for the last year and a half! He realised that she forgave him, and had come, like an angel of God, to tell him of her forgiveness, here, on his deathbed.

She pressed his hands, wept over him, stood and smiled over him, looked at him once more with those wonderful eyes of hers, and all the past, the undying ever-present past rose up before the mind's eye of the dying man. The spark of life flashed up again in his soul, as though to show, now that it was about to die out for ever on this earth, how hard, how hard it was to see so sweet a light fade away.

“Zina, Zina!” he said, “my Zina, do not weep; don't grieve, Zina, don't remind me that I must die! Let me gaze at you, so—so,—and feel that our two souls have come together once more—that you have forgiven me! Let me kiss your dear hands again, as I used, and so let me die without noticing the approach of death.

“How thin you have grown, Zina! and how sweetly you are looking at me now, my Zina! Do you remember how you used to laugh, in bygone days? Oh, Zina, my angel, I shall not ask you to forgive me,—I will not remember anything about—that, you know what! for if you *do* forgive me, I can never forgive myself!

“All the long, long nights, Zina, I have lain here and thought, and thought; and I have long since decided that I had better die, Zina; for I am not fit to live!”

Zina wept, and silently pressed his hands, as though she would stop him talking so.

“Why do you cry so?” continued the sick man. “Is it because I am dying? but all the past is long since dead and buried, Zina, my angel! You are wiser than I am, you know I am a bad, wicked man; surely you cannot love me still? Do you know what it has cost me to realise that I am a bad man? I, who have always prided myself before the world—and what on? Purity of heart, generosity of aim! Yes, Zina, so I did, while we read Shakespeare; and in theory I was pure and generous. Yet, how did I prove these qualities in practice?”

“Oh, don't! don't!” sobbed Zina, “you are not fair to yourself: don't talk like this, please don't!”

“Don't stop me, Zina! You forgave me, my angel; I know you forgave me long ago, but you must have judged me, and you know what sort of man I really am; and that is what tortures me so! I am unworthy of your love, Zina! And you were good and true, not only in theory, but in practice too! You told your mother you would marry me, and no one

else, and you would have kept your word! Do you know, Zina, I never realized before what you would sacrifice in marrying me! I could not even see that you might die of hunger if you did so! All I thought of was that you would be the bride of a great poet (in the future), and I could not understand your reasons for wishing to delay our union! So I reproached you and bullied you, and despised you and suspected you, and at last I committed the crime of showing your letter! I was not even a scoundrel at that moment! I was simply a worm-man. Ah! how you must have despised me! No, it is well that I am dying; it is well that you did not marry me! I should not have understood your sacrifice, and I should have worried you, and perhaps, in time, have learned to hate you, and ... but now it is good, it is best so! my bitter tears can at least cleanse my heart before I die. Ah! Zina! Zina! love me, love me as you did before for a little, little while! just for the last hour of my life. I know I am not worthy of it, but—oh, my angel, my Zina!"

Throughout this speech Zina, sobbing herself, had several times tried to stop the speaker; but he would not listen. He felt that he must unburden his soul by speaking out, and continued to talk—though with difficulty, panting, and with choking and husky utterance.

"Oh, if only you had never seen me and never loved me," said Zina, "you would have lived on now! Ah, *why* did we ever meet?"

"No, no, darling, don't blame yourself because I am dying! think of all my self-love, my romanticism! I am to blame for all, myself! Did they ever tell you my story in full? Do you remember, three years ago, there was a criminal here sentenced to death? This man heard that a criminal was never executed whilst ill! so he got hold of some wine, mixed tobacco in it, and drank it. The effect was to make him so dreadfully sick, with blood-spitting, that his lungs became affected; he was taken to a hospital, and a few weeks after he died of virulent consumption! Well, on that day, you know, after the letter, it struck me that I would do the same; and why do you think I chose consumption? Because I was afraid of any more sudden death? Perhaps. But, oh, Zina! believe me, a romantic nonsense played a great part in it; at all events, I had an idea that it would be striking and grand for me to be lying here, dying of consumption, and you standing and wringing your hands for woe that *love* should have brought me to this! You should come, I thought, and beg my pardon on your knees, and I should forgive you and die in your arms!"

"Oh, don't! don't!" said Zina, "don't talk of it now, dear! you are not really like that. Think of our happy days together, think of something else—not that, not that!"

“Oh, but it's so bitter to me, darling; and that's why I must speak of it. I havn't seen you for a year and a half, you know, and all that time I have been alone; and I don't think there was one single minute of all that time when I have not thought of you, my angel, Zina! And, oh! how I longed to do something to earn a better opinion from you! Up to these very last days I have never believed that I should really die; it has not killed me all at once, you know. I have long walked about with my lungs affected. For instance, I have longed to become a great poet suddenly, to publish a poem such as has never appeared before on this earth; I intended to pour my whole soul and being into it, so that wherever I was, or wherever *you* were, I should always be with you and remind you of myself in my poems! And my greatest longing of all was that you should think it all over and say to yourself at last some day, 'No, he is not such a wretch as I thought, after all!' It was stupid of me, Zina, stupid—stupid—wasn't it, darling?”

“No, no, Vaísia—no!” cried Zina. She fell on his breast and kissed his poor hot, dry hands.

“And, oh! how jealous I have been of you all this time, Zina! I think I should have died if I had heard of your wedding. I kept a watch over you, you know; I had a spy—there!” (he nodded towards his mother). “She used to go over and bring me news. You never loved Mosgliakoff—now *did* you, Zina? Oh, my darling, my darling, will you remember me when I am dead? Oh, I know you will; but years go by, Zina, and hearts grow cold, and yours will cool too, and you'll forget me, Zina!”

“No, no, never! I shall never marry. You are my first love, and my only—only—undying love!”

“But all things die, Zina, even our memories, and our good and noble feelings die also, and in their place comes reason. No, no, Zina, be happy, and live long. Love another if you can, you cannot love a poor dead man for ever! But think of me now and then, if only seldom; don't think of my faults: forgive them! For oh, Zina, there was good in that sweet love of ours as well as evil. Oh, golden, golden days never to be recalled! Listen, darling, I have always loved the sunset hour—remember me at that time, will you? Oh no, no! why must I die? oh *how* I should love to live on now. Think of that time—oh, just think of it! it was all spring then, the sun shone so bright, the flowers were so sweet, ah me! and look, now—look!”

And the poor thin finger pointed to the frozen window-pane. Then he seized Zina's hand and pressed it tight over his eyes, and sighed bitterly—bitterly! His sobs nearly burst his poor suffering breast.... And so he continued suffering and talking all the long day. Zina comforted and soothed him as she best could, but she too was full of deadly grief and pain. She told him—she promised him—never to forget; that she would never

love again as she loved him; and he believed her and wept, and smiled again, and kissed her hands. And so the day passed.

Meanwhile, Maria Alexandrovna had sent some ten times for Zina, begging her not to ruin her reputation irretrievably. At last, at dusk, she determined to go herself; she was out of her wits with terror and grief.

Having called Zina out into the next room, she proceeded to beg and pray her, on her knees, “to spare this last dagger at her heart!”

Zina had come out from the sick-room ill: her head was on fire,—she heard, but could not comprehend, what her mother said; and Marie Alexandrovna was obliged to leave the house again in despair, for Zina had determined to sit up all night with Vaísia.

She never left his bedside, but the poor fellow grew worse and worse. Another day came, but there was no hope that the sick man would see its close. His old mother walked about as though she had lost all control of her actions; grief had turned her head for the time; she gave her son medicines, but he would none of them! His death agony dragged on and on! He could not speak now, and only hoarse inarticulate sounds proceeded from his throat. To the very last instant he stared and stared at Zina, and never took his eyes off her; and when their light failed them he still groped with uncertain fingers for her hand, to press and fondle it in his own!

Meanwhile the short winter day was waning! And when at even the last sunbeam gilded the frozen window-pane of the little room, the soul of the sufferer fled in pursuit of it out of the emaciated body that had kept it prisoner.

The old mother, seeing that there was nothing left her now but the lifeless body of her beloved Vaísia, wrung her hands, and with a loud cry flung herself on his dead breast.

“This is your doing, you viper, you cursed snake,” she yelled to Zina, in her despair; “it was you ruined and killed him, you wicked, wretched girl.” But Zina heard nothing. She stood over the dead body like one bereft of her senses.

At last she bent over him, made the sign of the Cross, kissed him, and mechanically left the room. Her eyes were ablaze, her head whirled. Two nights without sleep, combined with her turbulent feelings, were almost too much for her reason; she had a sort of confused consciousness that all her past had just been torn out of her heart, and that a new life was beginning for her, dark and threatening.

But she had not gone ten paces when Mosgliakoff suddenly seemed to start up from the earth at her feet.

He must have been waiting for her here.

“Zenaida Afanassievna,” he began, peering all around him in what looked like timid haste; it was still pretty light. “Zenaida Afanassievna, of course I am an ass, or, if you please, perhaps not quite an ass, for I really think I am acting rather generously this time. Excuse my blundering, but I am rather confused, from a variety of causes.”

Zina glanced at him almost unconsciously, and silently went on her way. There was not much room for two on the narrow pavement, and as Zina did not make way for Paul, the latter was obliged to walk on the road at the side, which he did, never taking his eyes off her face.

“Zenaida Afanassievna,” he continued, “I have thought it all over, and if you are agreeable I am willing to renew my proposal of marriage. I am even ready to forget all that has happened; all the ignominy of the last two days, and to forgive it—but on one condition: that while we are still here our engagement is to remain a strict secret. You will depart from this place as soon as ever you can, and I shall quietly follow you. We will be married secretly, somewhere, so that nobody shall know anything about it; and then we'll be off to St. Petersburg by express post—don't take more than a small bag—eh? What say you, Zenaida Afanassievna; tell me quick, please, I can't stay here. We might be seen together, you know.”

Zina did not answer a word; she only looked at Mosgliakoff; but it was such a look that he understood all instantly, bowed, and disappeared down the next lane.

“Dear me,” he said to himself, “what's the meaning of this? The day before yesterday she became so jolly humble, and blamed herself all round. I've come on the wrong day, evidently!”

Meanwhile event followed event in Mordasof.

A very tragical circumstance occurred.

The old prince, who moved over to the hotel with Mosgliakoff, fell very ill that same night, dangerously ill. All Mordasof knew of it in the morning; the doctor never left his side. That evening a consultation of all the local medical talent was held over the old man (the invitations to which were issued in Latin); but in spite of the Latin and all they could do for him, the poor prince was quite off his head; he raved and asked his doctor to sing him some ballad or other; raved about wigs, and occasionally cried out as though frightened.

The Mordasof doctors decided that the hospitality of the town had given the prince inflammation of the stomach, which had somehow “gone to the head.”

There might be some subordinate moral causes to account for the attack; but at all events he ought to have died long ago; and so he would certainly die now.

In this last conclusion they were not far wrong; for the poor old prince breathed his last three days after, at the hotel.

This event impressed the Mordasof folk considerably. No one had expected such a tragical turn of affairs. They went in troops to the hotel to view the poor old body, and there they wagged their heads wisely and ended by passing severe judgment upon “the murderers of the unfortunate Prince,”—meaning thereby, of course, Maria Alexandrovna and her daughter. They predicted that this matter would go further. Mosgliakoff was in a dreadful state of perturbation: he did not know what to do with the body. Should he take it back to Donchanof! or what? Perhaps he would be held responsible for the old man's death, as he had brought him here? He did not like the look of things. The Mordasof people were less than useless for advice, they were all far too frightened to hazard a word.

But suddenly the scene changed.

One fine evening a visitor arrived—no less a person than the eminent Prince Shepetiloff, a young man of thirty-five, with colonel's epaulettes, a relative of the dead man. His arrival created a great stir among all classes at Mordasof.

It appeared that this gentleman had lately left St. Petersburg, and had called in at Donchanof. Finding no one there, he had followed the prince to Mordasof, where the news and circumstances of the old man's death fell upon him like a thunder-clap!

Even the governor felt a little guilty while detailing the story of the prince's death: all Mordasof felt and looked guilty.

This visitor took the matter entirely into his own hands, and Mosgliakoff made himself scarce before the presence of the prince's real nephew, and disappeared, no one knew whither.

The body was taken to the monastery, and all the Mordasof ladies flocked thither to the funeral. It was rumoured that Maria Alexandrovna was to be present, and that she was to go on her knees before the coffin, and loudly pray for pardon; and that all this was in conformity with the laws of the country.

Of course this was all nonsense, and Maria Alexandrovna never went near the place!

I forgot to state that the latter had carried off Zina to the country house, not deeming it possible to continue to live in the town. There she sat, and trembled over all the second-hand news she could get hold of as to events occurring at Mordasof.

The funeral procession passed within half a mile of her country house; so that Maria Alexandrovna could get a good view of the long train of carriages looking black against the white snow roads; but she could not bear the sight, and left the window.

Before the week was out, she and her daughter moved to Moscow, taking Afanassy Matveyevitch with them; and, within a month, the country house and town house were both for sale.

And so Mordasof lost its most eminent inhabitant for ever!

Afanassy Matveyevitch was said to be for sale with the country house.

A year—two years went by, and Mordasof had quite forgotten Maria Alexandrovna, or nearly so! Alas! so wags the world! It was said that she had bought another estate, and had moved over to some other provincial capital; where, of course, she had everybody under her thumb; that Zina was not yet married; and that Afanassy Matveyevitch—but why repeat all this nonsense? None of it was true; it was but rumour!——

It is three years since I wrote the last words of the above chronicles of Mordasof, and whoever would have believed that I should have to unfold my MS., and add another piece of news to my narrative?

Well, to business!—

Let's begin with Paul Mosgliakoff.—After leaving Mordasof, he went straight to St. Petersburg, where he very soon obtained the clerkship he had applied for. He then promptly forgot all about Mordasof, and the events enacted there. He enjoyed life, went into society, fell in love, made another offer of marriage, and had to swallow another snub; became disgusted with Petersburg life, and joined an expedition to one of the remote quarters of our vast empire.

This expedition passed through its perils of land and water, and arrived in due course at the capital of the remote province which was its destination.

There the members were well received by the governor, and a ball was arranged for their entertainment.

Mosgliakoff was delighted. He donned his best Petersburg uniform, and proceeded to the large ball-room with the full intention of producing a great and startling effect. His first duty was to make his bow to the governor-general's lady, of whom it was rumoured that she was young, and very lovely.

He advanced then, with some little “swagger,” but was suddenly rooted to the spot with amazement. Before him stood Zina, beautifully dressed, proud and haughty, and sparkling with diamonds! She did not recognize him; her eyes rested a moment on his face, and then passed on to glance at some other person.

Paul immediately departed to a safe and quiet corner, and there button-holed a young civilian whom he questioned, and from whom he learned certain most interesting facts. He learned that the governor-general had married a very rich and very lovely lady in Moscow, two years since; that his wife was certainly very beautiful, but, at the same time, excessively proud and haughty, and danced with none but generals. That the governor's lady had a mother, a lady of rank and fashion, who had followed them from Moscow; that this lady was very clever and wise, but that even she was quite under the thumb of her daughter; as for the general (the governor), he doted on his wife.

Mosgliakoff inquired after our old friend Afanassy; but in their “remote province” nothing was known of that gentleman.

Feeling a little more at home presently, Paul began to walk about the room, and shortly espied Maria Alexandrovna herself. She was wonderfully dressed, and was surrounded by a bevy of ladies who evidently dwelt in the glory of her patronage: she appeared to be exceedingly amiable to them—wonderfully so!

Paul plucked up courage and introduced himself. Maria Alexandrovna seemed to give a shudder at first sight of him, but in an instant she was herself again. She was kind enough to recognise Paul, and to ask him all sorts of questions as to his Petersburg experiences, and so on. She never said a word about Mordasof, however. She behaved as though no such place existed.

After a minute or so, and having dropped a question as to some Petersburg prince whom Paul had never so much as heard of, she turned to speak to another young gentleman standing by, and in a second or two was entirely oblivious of Mosgliakoff. With a sarcastic smile our friend passed on into the large hall. Feeling offended—though he knew not why—he decided not to dance. So he leant his back against one of the pillars, and for a couple of hours did nothing but follow Zina about with his eyes. But alas! all the grace of his figure and attitude, and all the fascinations of his general appearance were lost upon her, she never looked at him.

At last, with legs stiff from standing, tired, hungry, and feeling miserable generally, he went home. Here he tossed about half the night thinking of the past, and next morning, having the chance of joining a branch party of his expedition, he accepted the opportunity with delight, and left the town at once.

The bells tinkled, the horses trotted gaily along, kicking up snowballs as they went. Paul Mosgliakoff fell to thinking, then he fell to snoring, and so he continued until the third station from the start; there he awoke fresh and jolly, and with the new scenery came newer, and healthier, and pleasanter thoughts.

THE END OF “UNCLE'S DREAM.”

THE PERMANENT HUSBAND.

CHAPTER I.

Summer had come, and Velchaninoff, contrary to his expectations, was still in St. Petersburg. His trip to the south of Russia had fallen through, and there seemed no end to the business which had detained him.

This business—which was a lawsuit as to certain property—had taken a very disagreeable aspect. Three months ago the thing had appeared to be by no means complicated—in fact, there had seemed to be scarcely any question as to the rights and wrongs of the matter, but all seemed to change suddenly.

“Everything else seems to have changed for the worse, too!” said Velchaninoff to himself, over and over again.

He was employing a clever lawyer—an eminent man, and an expensive one, too; but in his impatience and suspicion he began to interfere in the matter himself. He read and wrote papers—all of which the lawyer put into his waste-paper basket—*holus bolus*; called in continually at the courts and offices, made inquiries, and confused and worried everybody concerned in the matter; so at least the lawyer declared, and begged him for mercy's sake to go away to the country somewhere.

But he could not make up his mind to do so. He stayed in town and enjoyed the dust, and the hot nights, and the closeness of the air of St. Petersburg, things which are enough to destroy anyone's nerves. His lodgings were somewhere near the Great Theatre; he had lately taken them, and did not like them. Nothing went well with him;

his hypochondria increased with each day, and he had long been a victim to that disorder.

Velchaninoff was a man who had seen a great deal of the world; he was not quite young, thirty-eight years old—perhaps thirty-nine, or so; and all this "old age," as he called it, had "fallen upon him quite unawares." However, as he himself well understood, he had aged more in the *quality* than in the number of the years of his life; and if his infirmities were really creeping upon him, they must have come from within and not from outside causes. He looked young enough still. He was a tall, stout man, with light-brown thick hair, without a suspicion of white about it, and a light beard that reached half way down his chest. At first sight you might have supposed him to be of a lax, careless disposition or character, but on studying him more closely you would have found that, on the contrary, the man was decidedly a stickler for the proprieties of this world, and withal brought up in the ways and graces of the very best society. His manners were very good—free but graceful—in spite of this lately-acquired habit of grumbling and reviling things in general. He was still full of the most perfect, aristocratic self-confidence: probably he did not himself suspect to how great an extent this was so, though he was a most decidedly intelligent, I may say clever, even talented man. His open, healthy-looking face was distinguished by an almost feminine refinement, which quality gained him much attention from the fair sex. He had large blue eyes—eyes which ten years ago had known well how to persuade and attract; such clear, merry, careless eyes they had been, that they invariably brought over to his side any person he wished to gain. Now, when he was nearly forty years old, their ancient, kind, frank expression had died out of them, and a certain cynicism—a cunning—an irony very often, and yet another variety of expression, of late—an expression of melancholy or pain, undefined but keen, had taken the place of the earlier attractive qualities of his eyes. This expression of melancholy especially showed itself when he was alone; and it was a strange fact that the gay, careless, happy fellow of a couple of years ago, the man who could tell a funny story so inimitably, should now love nothing so well as to be all alone. He intended to throw up most of his friends—a quite unnecessary step, in spite of his present financial difficulties. Probably his vanity was to blame for this intention: he could not bear to see his old friends in his present position; with his vain suspicious character it would be most unpalatable to him.

But his vanity began to change its nature in solitude. It did not grow less, on the contrary; but it seemed to develop into a special type of vanity which was unlike its old self. This new vanity suffered from entirely different causes, "*higher* causes, if I may so express it," he said, "and if there really be higher and lower motives in this world."

He defined these “higher things” as matters which he could not laugh at, or turn to ridicule when happening in his own individual experience. Of course it would be quite another thing with the same subjects in society; by *himself* he could not ridicule then; but put him among other people, and he would be the first to tear himself from all of those secret resolutions of his conscience made in solitude, and laugh them to scorn.

Very often, on rising from his bed in the morning, he would feel ashamed of the thoughts and feelings which had animated him during the long sleepless night—and his nights of late had been sleepless. He seemed suspicious of everything and everybody, great and small, and grew mistrustful of himself.

One fact stood out clearly, and that was that during those sleepless nights his thoughts and opinions took huge leaps and bounds, sometimes changing entirely from the thoughts and opinions of the daytime. This fact struck him very forcibly; and he took occasion to consult an eminent medical friend. He spoke in fun, but the doctor informed him that the fact of feelings and opinions changing during meditations at night, and during sleeplessness, was one long recognised by science; and that that was especially the case with persons of strong thinking power, and of acute feelings. He stated further that very often the beliefs of a whole life are uprooted under the melancholy influence of night and inability to sleep, and that often the most fateful resolutions are made under the same influence; that sometimes this impressionability to the mystic influence of the dark hours amounted to a malady, in which case measures must be taken, the radical manner of living should be changed, diet considered, a journey undertaken if possible, etc., etc.

Velchaninoff listened no further, but he was sure that in his own case there was decided malady.

Very soon his morning meditations began to partake of the nature of those of the night, but they were more bitter. Certain events of his life now began to recur to his memory more and more vividly; they would strike him suddenly, and without apparent reason: things which had been forgotten for ten or fifteen years—some so long ago that he thought it miraculous that he should have been able to recall them at all. But that was not all—for, after all, what man who has seen any life has not hundreds of such recollections of the past? The principal point was that all this past came back to him now with an absolutely new light thrown upon it, and he seemed to look at it from an entirely new and unexpected point of view. Why did some of his acts appear to him now to be nothing better than crimes? It was not merely in the judgment of his intellect that these things appeared so to him now—had it been only his poor sick mind, he would not have trusted it; but his whole being seemed to condemn him; he

would curse and even weep over these recollections of the past! If anyone had told him a couple of years since that he would *weep* over anything, he would have laughed the idea to scorn.

At first he recalled the unpleasant experiences of his life: certain failures in society, humiliations; he remembered how some designing person had so successfully blackened his character that he was requested to cease his visits to a certain house; how once, and not so very long ago, he had been publicly insulted, and had not challenged the offender; how once an epigram had been fastened to his name by some witty person, in the midst of a party of pretty women and he had not found a reply; he remembered several unpaid debts, and how he had most stupidly run through two very respectable fortunes.

Then he began to recall facts belonging to a "higher" order. He remembered that he had once insulted a poor old grey-headed clerk, and that the latter had covered his face with his hands and cried, which Velchaninoff had thought a great joke at the time, but now looked upon in quite another light. Then he thought how he had once, merely for fun, set a scandal going about the beautiful little wife of a certain schoolmaster, and how the husband had got to hear the rumour. He (Velchaninoff) had left the town shortly after and did not know how the matter had ended; but now he fell to wondering and picturing to himself the possible consequences of his action; and goodness knows where this theme would not have taken him to if he had not suddenly recalled another picture: that of a poor girl, whom he had been ashamed of and never thought of loving, but whom he had betrayed and forsaken, her and her child, when he left St. Petersburg. He had afterwards searched for this girl and her baby for a whole year, but never found them.

Of this sort of recollections there were, alas! but too many; and each one seemed to bring along with it a train of others. His vanity began to suffer, little by little, under these memories. I have said that his vanity had developed into a new type of vanity. There were moments (few albeit) in which he was not even ashamed of having no carriage of his own, now; or of being seen by one of his former friends in shabby clothes; or when, if seen and looked at by such a person contemptuously, he was high-minded enough to suppress even a frown. Of course such moments of self-oblivion were rare; but, as I said before, his vanity began little by little to change away from its former quarters and to centre upon one question which was perpetually ranging itself before his intellect. "There is some power or other," he would muse, sarcastically, "somewhere, which is extremely interested in my morals, and sends me these damnable recollections and tears of remorse! Let them come, by all means; but they have not the slightest effect on me! for I haven't a scrap of independence about

me, in spite of my wretched forty years, I know that for certain. Why, if it were to happen so that I should gain anything by spreading another scandal about that schoolmaster's wife, (for instance, that she had accepted presents from me, or something of that sort), I should certainly spread it without a thought."

But though no other opportunity ever did occur of maligning the schoolmistress, yet the very thought alone that *if* such an opportunity were to occur he would inevitably seize it was almost fatal to him at times. He was not tortured with memory at every moment of his life; he had intervals of time to breathe and rest in. But the longer he stayed, the more unpleasant did he find his life in St. Petersburg. July came in. At certain moments he felt inclined to throw up his lawsuit and all, and go down to the Crimea; but after an hour or so he would despise his own idea, and laugh at himself for entertaining it.

"These thoughts won't be driven away by a mere journey down south," he said to himself, "when they have once begun to annoy me; besides, if I am easy in my conscience now, I surely need not try to run away from any such worrying recollections of past days!" "Why should I go after all?" he resumed, in a strain of melancholy philosophizing; "this place is a very heaven for a hypochondriac like myself, what with the dust and the heat, and the discomfort of this house, what with the nonsensical swagger and pretence of all these wretched little 'civil servants' in the departments I frequent! Everyone is delightfully candid—and candour is undoubtedly worthy of all respect! I *won't* go away—I'll stay and die here rather than go!"

CHAPTER II.

It was the third of July. The heat and closeness of the air had become quite unbearable. The day had been a busy one for Velchaninoff—he had been walking and driving about without rest, and had still in prospect a visit in the evening to a certain state councillor who lived somewhere on the Chornaya Riéchka (black stream), and whom he was anxious to drop in upon unexpectedly.

At six o'clock our hero issued from his house once more, and trudged off to dine at a restaurant on the Nefsky, near the police-bridge—a second-rate sort of place, but French. Here he took his usual corner, and ordered his usual dinner, and waited.

He always had a rouble[1] dinner, and paid for his wine extra, which moderation he looked upon as a discreet sacrifice to the temporary financial embarrassment under which he was suffering.

He regularly went through the ceremony of wondering how he could bring himself to eat “such nastiness,” and yet as regularly he demolished every morsel, and with excellent show of appetite too, just as though he had eaten nothing for three days.

“This appetite can't be healthy!” he murmured to himself sometimes, observing his own voracity. However, on this particular occasion, he sat down to his dinner in a miserably bad humour: he threw his hat angrily away somewhere, tipped his chair back,—and reflected.

He was in the sort of humour that if his next neighbour—dining at the little table near him—were to rattle his plate, or if the boy serving him were to make any little blunder, or, in fact, if any little petty annoyance were to put him out of a sudden, he was quite capable of shouting at the offender, and, in fact, of kicking up a serious row on the smallest pretext.

Soup was served to him. He took up his spoon, and was about to commence operations, when he suddenly threw it down again, and started from his seat. An unexpected thought had struck him, and in an instant he had realized why he had been plunged in gloom and mental perturbation during the last few days. Goodness knows why he thus suddenly became inspired, as it were, with the truth; but so it was. He jumped from his chair, and in an instant it all stood out before him as plain as his five fingers! “It's all that hat!” he muttered to himself; “it's all simply and solely that damnable round hat, with the crape band round it; that's the reason and cause of all my worries these last days!”

He began to think; and the more he thought, the more dejected he became, and the more astonishing appeared the “remarkable circumstance of the hat.”

“But, hang it all, there *is* no circumstance!” he growled to himself. “What circumstance do I mean? There's been nothing in the nature of an event or occurrence!”

The fact of the matter was this: Nearly a fortnight since, he had met for the first time, somewhere about the corner of the Podiacheskaya, a gentleman with crape round his hat. There was nothing particular about the man—he was just like all others; but as he passed Velchaninoff he had stared at him so fixedly that it was impossible to avoid noticing him, and more than noticing—observing him attentively.

The man's face seemed to be familiar to Velchaninoff. He had evidently seen him somewhere and at some time or other.

“But one sees thousands of people during one's life,” thought Velchaninoff; “one can't remember every face!” So he had gone on his way, and before he was twenty yards further, to all appearances he had forgotten all about the meeting, in spite of the strength of the first impression made upon him.

And yet he had *not* forgotten; for the impression remained all day, and a very original impression it was, too,—a kind of objectless feeling of anger against he knew not what. He remembered his exact feelings at this moment, a fortnight after the occurrence: how he had been puzzled by the angry nature of his sentiments at the time, and puzzled to such an extent that he had never for a moment connected his ill-humour with the meeting of the morning, though he had felt as cross as possible all day. But the gentleman with the crape band had not lost much time about reminding Velchaninoff of his existence, for the very next day he met the latter again, on the Nefsky Prospect and again he had stared in a peculiarly fixed way at him.

Velchaninoff flared up and spat on the ground in irritation—Russian like, but a moment after he was wondering at his own wrath. “There are faces, undoubtedly,” he reflected, “which fill one with disgust at first sight; but I certainly *have* met that fellow somewhere or other.

“Yes, I *have* met him before!” he muttered again, half an hour later.

And again, as on the last occasion, he was in a vile humour all that evening, and even went so far as to have a bad dream in the night; and yet it never entered his head to imagine that the cause of his bad temper on both occasions had been the accidental meeting with the gentleman in mourning, although on the second evening he had remembered and thought of the chance encounter two or three times.

He had even flared up angrily to think that “such a dirty-looking cad” should presume to linger in his memory so long; he would have felt it humiliating to himself to imagine for a moment that such a wretched creature could possibly be in any way connected with the agitated condition of his feelings.

Two days later the pair had met once more at the landing place of one of the small Neva ferry steamers.

On the third occasion Velchaninoff was ready to swear that the man recognised him, and had pressed through the crowd towards him; had even dared to stretch out his hand and call him by name. As to this last fact he was not quite certain, however. “At all events, who the deuce *is* he?” thought Velchaninoff, “and why can't the idiot come up and speak to me if he really does recognise me; and if he so much wishes to do

so?” With these thoughts Velchaninoff had taken a droshky and started off for the Smolney Monastery, where his lawyer lived.

Half an hour later he was engaged in his usual quarrel with that gentleman.

But that same evening he was in a worse humour than ever, and his night was spent in fantastic dreams and imaginings, which were anything but pleasant. “I suppose it's bile!” he concluded, as he paid his matutinal visit to the looking-glass.

This was the third meeting.

Then, for five days there was not a sign of the man; and yet, much to his distaste, Velchaninoff could not, for the life of him, avoid thinking of the man with the crape band.

He caught himself musing over the fellow. “What have I to do with him?” he thought. “What can his business in St. Petersburg be?—he looks busy: and whom is he in mourning for? He clearly recognises me, but I don't know in the least who he is! And why do such people as he is put crape on their hats? it doesn't seem 'the thing' for them, somehow! I believe I shall recognise this fellow if I ever get a good close look at him!”

And there came over him that sensation we all know so well—the same feeling that one has when one can't for the life of one think of the required word; every other word comes up; associations with the right word come up; occasions when one has used the word come up; one wanders round and round the immediate vicinity of the word wanted, but the actual word itself will not appear, though you may break your head to get at it!

“Let's see, now: it was—yes—some while since. It was—where on earth was it? There was a—oh! devil take whatever there was or wasn't there! What does it matter to me?” he broke off angrily of a sudden. “I'm not going to lower myself by thinking of a little cad like that!”

He felt very angry; but when, in the evening, he remembered that he had been so upset, and recollected the cause of his anger, he felt the disagreeable sensation of having been caught by someone doing something wrong.

This fact puzzled and annoyed him.

“There must be some reason for my getting so angry at the mere recollection of that man's face,” he thought, but he didn't finish thinking it out.

But the next evening he was still more indignant; and this time, he really thought, with good cause. “Such audacity is unparalleled!” he said to himself.

The fact of the matter is, there had been a fourth meeting with the man of the crape hat band. The latter had apparently arisen from the earth and confronted him. But let me explain what had happened.

It so chanced that Velchaninoff had just met, accidentally, that very state-councillor mentioned a few pages back, whom he had been so anxious to see, and on whom he had intended to pounce unexpectedly at his country house. This gentleman evidently avoided Velchaninoff, but at the same time was most necessary to the latter in his lawsuit. Consequently, when Velchaninoff met him, the one was delighted, while the other was very much the reverse. Velchaninoff had immediately button-holed him, and walked down the street with him, talking; doing his very utmost to keep the sly old fox to the subject on which it was so necessary that he should be pumped. And it was just at this most important moment, when Velchaninoff's intellect was all on the *qui vive* to catch up the slightest hints of what he wished to get at, while the foxy old councillor (aware of the fact) was doing his best to reveal nothing, that the former, taking his eyes from his companion's face for one instant, beheld the gentleman of the crape hatband walking along the other side of the road, and looking at him—nay, *watching* him, evidently—and apparently smiling!

“Devil take him!” said Velchaninoff, bursting out into fury at once, while the “old fox” instantly disappeared, “and I should have succeeded in another minute. Curse that dirty little hound! he's simply spying me. I'll—I'll hire somebody to—I'll take my oath he laughed at me! D—n him, I'll thrash him. I wish I had a stick with me. I'll—I'll buy one! I won't leave this matter so. Who the deuce is he? I *will* know! Who is he?”

At last, three days after this fourth encounter, we find Velchaninoff sitting down to dinner at his restaurant, as recorded a page or two back, in a state of mind bordering upon the furious. He could not conceal the state of his feelings from himself, in spite of all his pride. He was obliged to confess at last, that all his anxiety, his irritation, his state of agitation generally, must undoubtedly be connected with, and absolutely attributed to, the appearance of the wretched-looking creature with the crape hatband, in spite of his insignificance.

“I may be a hypochondriac,” he reflected, “and I may be inclined to make an elephant out of a gnat; but how does it help me? What use is it to me if I persuade myself to believe that *perhaps* all this is fancy? Why, if every dirty little wretch like that is to have the power of upsetting a man like myself, why—it's—it's simply unbearable!”

Undoubtedly, at this last (fifth) encounter of to-day, the elephant had proved himself a very small gnat indeed. The “crape man” had appeared suddenly, as usual, and had passed by Velchaninoff, but without looking up at him this time; indeed, he had gone by with downcast eyes, and had even seemed anxious to pass unobserved. Velchaninoff had turned rapidly round and shouted as loud as ever he could at him.

“Hey!” he cried. “You! Crape hatband! You want to escape notice this time, do you? Who are you?”

Both the question and the whole idea of calling after the man were absurdly foolish, and Velchaninoff knew it the moment he had said the words. The man had turned round, stopped for an instant, lost his head, smiled—half made up his mind to say something,—had waited half a minute in painful indecision, then twisted suddenly round again, and “bolted” without a word. Velchaninoff gazed after him in amazement. “What if it be *I* that haunt *him*, and not he me, after all?” he thought. However, Velchaninoff ate up his dinner, and then drove off to pounce upon the town councillor at the latter's house, if he could.

The councillor was not in; and he was informed that he would scarcely be at home before three or four in the morning, because he had gone to a “name's-day party.”

Velchaninoff felt that this was too bad! In his rage he determined to follow and hunt the fellow up at the party: he actually took a droshky, and started off with that wild idea; but luckily he thought better of it on the way, got out of the vehicle and walked away towards the “Great Theatre,” near which he lived. He felt that he must have motion; also he *must* absolutely sleep well this coming night: in order to sleep he must be tired; so he walked all the way home—a fairly long walk, and arrived there about half-past ten, as tired as he could wish.

His lodging, which he had taken last March, and had abused ever since, apologising to himself for living “in such a hole,” and at the same time excusing himself for the fact by the reflection that it was only for a while, and that he had dropped quite accidentally into St. Petersburg—thanks to that cursed lawsuit!—his lodging, I say, was by no means so bad as he made it out to be!

The entrance certainly was a little dark, and dirty-looking, being just under the arch of the gateway. But he had two fine large light rooms on the second floor, separated by the entrance hall: one of these rooms overlooked the yard and the other the street. Leading out of the former of these was a smaller room, meant to be used as a bedroom; but Velchaninoff had filled it with a disordered array of books and papers, and preferred to sleep in one of the large rooms, the one overlooking the street, to wit.

His bed was made for him, every day, upon the large divan. The rooms were full of good furniture, and some valuable ornaments and pictures were scattered about, but the whole place was in dreadful disorder; the fact being that at this time Velchaninoff was without a regular servant. His one domestic had gone away to stay with her friends in the country; he thought of taking a man, but decided that it was not worth while for a short time; besides he hated flunkeys, and ended by making arrangements with his dvornik's sister Martha, who was to come up every morning and “do out” his rooms, he leaving the key with her as he went out each day. Martha did absolutely nothing towards tidying the place and robbed him besides, but he didn't care, he liked to be alone in the house. But solitude is all very well within certain limits, and Velchaninoff found that his nerves could not stand all this sort of thing at certain bilious moments; and it so fell out that he began to loathe his room more and more every time he entered it.

However, on this particular evening he hardly gave himself time to undress; he threw himself on his bed, and determined that nothing should make him think of *anything*, and that he would fall asleep at once.

And, strangely enough, his head had hardly touched the pillow before he actually was asleep; and this was the first time for a month past that such a thing had occurred.

He awoke at about two, considerably agitated; he had dreamed certain very strange dreams, reminding him of the incoherent wanderings of fever.

The subject seemed to be some crime which he had committed and concealed, but of which he was accused by a continuous flow of people who swarmed into his rooms for the purpose. The crowd which had already collected within was enormous, and yet they continued to pour in in such numbers that the door was never shut for an instant.

But his whole interest seemed to centre in one strange looking individual,—a man who seemed to have once been very closely and intimately connected with him, but who had died long ago and now reappeared for some reason or other.

The most tormenting part of the matter was that Velchaninoff could not recollect who this man was,—he could not remember his name,—though he recollected the fact that he had once dearly loved him. All the rest of the people swarming into the room seemed to be waiting for the final word of this man,—either the condemnation or the justification of Velchaninoff was to be pronounced by him,—and everyone was impatiently waiting to hear him speak.

But he sat motionless at the table, and would not open his lips to say a word of any sort.

The uproar continued, the general annoyance increased, and, suddenly, Velchaninoff himself strode up to the man in a fury, and smote him because he would not speak. Velchaninoff felt the strangest satisfaction in having thus smitten him; his heart seemed to freeze in horror for what he had done, and in acute suffering for the crime involved in his action,—but in that very sensation of freezing at the heart lay the sense of satisfaction which he felt.

Exasperated more and more, he struck the man a second and a third time; and then—in a sort of intoxication of fury and terror, which amounted to actual insanity, and yet bore within it a germ of delightful satisfaction, he ceased to count his blows, and rained them in without ceasing.

He felt he must destroy, annihilate, demolish all this.

Suddenly something strange happened; everyone present had given a dreadful cry and turned expectantly towards the door, while at the same moment there came three terrific peals of the hall-bell, so violent that it appeared someone was anxious to pull the bell-handle out.

Velchaninoff awoke, started up in a second, and made for the door; he was persuaded that the ring at the bell had been no dream or illusion, but that someone had actually rung, and was at that moment standing at the front door.

“It would be *too* unnatural if such a clear and unmistakable ring should turn out to be nothing but an item of a dream!” he thought. But, to his surprise, it proved that such was nevertheless the actual state of the case! He opened the door and went out on to the landing; he looked downstairs and about him, but there was not a soul to be seen. The bell hung motionless. Surprised, but pleased, he returned into his room. He lit a candle, and suddenly remembered that he had left the door closed, but not locked and chained. He had often returned home before this evening and forgotten to lock the door behind him, without attaching any special significance to the fact; his maid had often respectfully protested against such neglect while with him. He now returned to the entrance hall to make the door fast; before doing so he opened it, however, and had one more look about the stairs. He then shut the door and fastened the chain and hook, but did not take the trouble to turn the key in the lock.

Some clock struck half-past two at this moment, so that he had had three hours' sleep—more or less.

His dream had agitated him to such an extent that he felt unwilling to lie down again at once; he decided to walk up and down the room two or three times first, just long enough to smoke a cigar. Having half-dressed himself, he went to the window, drew

the heavy curtains aside and pulled up one of the blinds, it was almost full daylight. These light summer nights of St. Petersburg always had a bad effect upon his nerves, and of late they had added to the causes of his sleeplessness, so that a few weeks since he had invested in these thick curtains, which completely shut out the light when drawn close.

Having thus let in the sunshine, quite oblivious of the lighted candle on the table, he commenced to walk up and down the room. Still feeling the burden of his dream upon him, its impression was even now at work upon his mind, he still felt a painfully guilty sensation about him, caused by the fact that he had allowed himself to raise his hand against “that man” and strike him. “But, my dear sir!” he argued with himself, “it was not a man at all! the whole thing was a dream! what's the use of worrying yourself for nothing?”

Velchaninoff now became obstinately convinced that he was a sick man, and that to his sickly state of body was to be attributed all his perturbation of mind. He was an invalid.

It had always been a weak point with Velchaninoff that he hated to think of himself as growing old or infirm; and yet in his moments of anger he loved to exaggerate one or the other in order to worry himself.

“It's old age,” he now muttered to himself, as he paced up and down the room. “I'm becoming an old fogey—that's the fact of the matter! I'm losing my memory—see ghosts, and have dreams, and hear bells ring—curse it all! I know these dreams of old, they always herald fever with me. I dare swear that the whole business of this man with the crape hatband has been a dream too! I was perfectly right yesterday, he isn't haunting me the least bit in the world; it is I that am haunting *him*! I've invented a pretty little ghost-story about him and then climb under the table in terror at my own creation! Why do I call him a little cad, too? he may be a most respectable individual for all I know! His face is a disagreeable one, certainly, though there is nothing hideous about it! He dresses just like anyone else. I don't know—there's something about his look—There I go again! What the devil have I got to do with his look? what a fool I am—just as though I could not live without the dirty little wretch—curse him!”

Among other thoughts connected with this haunting crape-man was one which puzzled Velchaninoff immensely; he felt convinced that at some time or other he had known the man, and known him very intimately; and that now the latter, when meeting him, always laughed at him because he was aware of some great secret of his former life, or because he was amused to see Velchaninoff's present humiliating condition of poverty.

Mechanically our hero approached the window in order to get a breath of fresh air—when he was suddenly seized with a violent fit of shuddering;—a feeling came over him that something unusual and unheard-of was happening before his very eyes.

He had not had time to open the window when something he saw caused him to slip behind the corner of the curtain, and hide himself.

The man in the crape hatband was standing on the opposite side of the street.

He was standing with his face turned directly towards Velchaninoff's window, but evidently unaware of the latter's presence there, and was carefully examining the house, and apparently considering some question connected with it.

He seemed to come to a decision after a moment's thought, and raised his finger to his forehead; then he looked quietly about him, and ran swiftly across the road on tiptoe. He reached the gate, and entered it; this gate was often left open on summer nights until two or three in the morning.

“He's coming to me,” muttered Velchaninoff, and with equal caution he left the window, and ran to the front door; arrived in the hall, he stood in breathless expectation before the door, and placed his trembling hand carefully upon the hook which he had fastened a few minutes since, and stood listening for the tread of the expected footfall on the stairs. His heart was beating so loud that he was afraid he might miss the sound of the cautious steps approaching.

He could understand nothing of what was happening, but it seemed clear that his dream was about to be realised.

Velchaninoff was naturally brave. He loved risk for its own sake, and very often ran into useless dangers, with no one by to see, to please himself. But this was different, somehow; he was not himself, and yet he was as brave as ever, but with something added. He made out every movement of the stranger from behind his own door.

“Ah!—there he comes!—he's on the steps now!—here he comes!—he's up now!—now he's looking down stairs and all about, and crouching down! Aha! there's his hand on the door-handle—he's trying it!—he thought he would find it unlocked!—then he must know that I *do* leave it unlocked sometimes!—He's trying it again!—I suppose he thinks the hook may slip!—he doesn't care to go away without doing anything!”

So ran Velchaninoff's thoughts, and so indeed followed the man's actions. There was no doubt about it, someone was certainly standing outside and trying the door-handle, carefully and cautiously pulling at the door itself, and, in fact, endeavouring to effect an entrance; equally sure was it that the person so doing must have his own

object in trying to sneak into another man's house at dead of night. But Velchaninoff's plan of action was laid, and he awaited the proper moment; he was anxious to seize a good opportunity—slip the hook and chain—open the door wide, suddenly, and stand face to face with this bugbear, and then ask him what the deuce he wanted there.

No sooner devised than executed.

Awaiting the proper moment, Velchaninoff suddenly slipped the hook, pushed the door wide, and almost tumbled over the man with the crape hatband!

CHAPTER III.

The crape-man stood rooted to the spot dumb with astonishment.

Both men stood opposite one another on the landing, and both stared in each other's eyes, silent and motionless.

So passed a few moments, and suddenly, like a flash of lightning, Velchaninoff became aware of the identity of his guest.

At the same moment the latter seemed to guess that Velchaninoff had recognised him. Velchaninoff could see it in his eyes. In one instant the visitor's whole face was all ablaze with its very sweetest of smiles.

“Surely I have the pleasure of speaking to Aleksey Ivanovitch?” he asked, in the most dulcet of voices, comically inappropriate to the circumstances of the case.

“Surely you are Pavel Pavlovitch Trusotsky?” asked Velchaninoff, in return, after a pause, and with an expression of much perplexity.

“I had the pleasure of your acquaintance ten years ago at T——, and, if I may remind you of the fact, we were almost intimate friends.”

“Quite so—oh yes! but it is now three o'clock in the morning, and you have been trying my lock for the last ten minutes.”

“Three o'clock!” cried the visitor, looking at his watch with an air of melancholy surprise.

“Why, so it is! dear me—three o'clock! forgive me, Aleksey Ivanovitch! I ought to have found it out before thinking of paying you a visit. I will do myself the honour of calling to explain another day, and now I—.”

“Oh no;—no, no! If you are to explain at all let's have it at once; this moment!” interrupted Velchaninoff warmly. “Kindly step in here, into the room! You must have meant to come in, you know; you didn't come here at night, like this, simply for the pleasure of trying my lock?”

He felt excited, and at the same time was conscious of a sort of timidity; he could not collect his thoughts. He was ashamed of himself for it. There was no danger, no mystery about the business, nothing but the silly figure of Pavel Pavlovitch.

And yet he could not feel satisfied that there was nothing particular in it; he felt afraid of something to come, he knew not what or when.

However, he made the man enter, seated him in a chair, and himself sat down on the side of his bed, a yard or so off, and rested his elbows on his knees while he quietly waited for the other to begin. He felt irritated; he stared at his visitor and let his thoughts run. Strangely enough, the other never opened his mouth; he seemed to be entirely oblivious of the fact that it was his duty to speak. Nay, he was even looking enquiringly at Velchaninoff as though quite expecting that the latter would speak to *him*!

Perhaps he felt a little uncomfortable at first, somewhat as a mouse must feel when he finds himself unexpectedly in the trap.

Velchaninoff very soon lost his patience.

“Well?” he cried, “you are not a fantasy or a dream or anything of that kind, are you? You aren't a corpse, are you? Come, my friend, this is not a game or play. I want your explanation, please!”

The visitor fidgeted about a little, smiled, and began to speak cautiously.

“So far as I can see,” he said, “the time of night of my visit is what surprises you, and that I should have come as I did; in fact, when I remember the past, and our intimacy, and all that, I am astonished myself; but the fact is, I did not mean to come in at all, and if I did so it was purely an accident.”

“An accident! Why, I saw you creeping across the road on tip-toes!”

“You saw me? Indeed! Come, then you know as much or more about the matter than I do; but I see I am annoying you. This is how it was: I've been in town three weeks or so on business. I am Pavel Pavlovitch Trusotsky, you recognized me yourself, my business in town is to effect an exchange of departments. I am trying for a situation in another place—one with a large increase of salary; but all this is beside the point; the

fact of the matter is, I believe I have been delaying my business on purpose. I believe if everything were settled at this moment I should still be dawdling in this St. Petersburg of yours in my present condition of mind. I go wandering about as though I had lost all interest in things, and were rather glad of the fact, in my present condition of mind."

"What condition of mind?" asked Velchaninoff, frowning.

The visitor raised his eyes to Velchaninoff's, lifted his hat from the ground beside him, and with great dignity pointed out the black crape band.

"There, sir, in *that* condition of mind!" he observed.

Velchaninoff stared stupidly at the crape, and thence at the man's face. Suddenly his face flushed up in a hot blush for a moment, and he was violently agitated.

"Not Natalia Vasilievna, surely?"

"Yes, Natalia Vasilievna! Last March! Consumption, sir, and almost suddenly—all over in two or three months—and here am I left as you see me!"

So saying, Pavel Pavlovitch, with much show of feeling, bent his bald head down and kept it bent for some ten seconds, while he held out his two hands, in one of which was the hat with the band, in explanatory emotion.

This gesture, and the man's whole air, seemed to brighten Velchaninoff up; he smiled sarcastically for one instant, not more at present, for the news of this lady's death (he had known her so long ago, and had forgotten her many a year since) had made a quite unexpected impression upon his mind.

"Is it possible!" he muttered, using the first words that came to his lips, "and pray why did you not come here and tell me at once?"

"Thanks for your kind interest, I see and value it, in spite of——"

"In spite of what?"

"In spite of so many years of separation you at once sympathised with my sorrow—and in fact with myself, and so fully too—that I feel naturally grateful. That's all I had to tell you, sir! Don't suppose I doubt my friends, you know; why, even here, in this place, I could put my finger on several very sincere friends indeed (for instance, Stepan Michailovitch Bagantoff); but remember, my dear Aleksey Ivanovitch—nine years have passed since we were acquaintances—or friends, if you'll allow me to say so—and meanwhile you have never been to see us, never written."

The guest sang all this out as though he were reading it from music, but kept his eyes fixed on the ground the while, although, of course, he saw what was going on above his eyelashes exceedingly well all the same.

Velchaninoff had found his head by this time.

With a strange sort of fascinated attention, which strengthened itself every moment, he continued to gaze at and listen to Pavel Pavlovitch, and of a sudden, when the latter stopped speaking, a flood of curious ideas swept unexpectedly through his brain.

“But look here,” he cried, “how is it that I never recognized you all this while?—we've met five times, at least, in the streets!”

“Quite so—I am perfectly aware of the circumstance. You chanced to meet me two or three times, and——”

“No, no! *you* met *me*, you know—not I you!” Velchaninoff suddenly burst into a roar of laughter, and rose from his seat. Pavel Pavlovitch paused a moment, looked keenly at Velchaninoff, and then continued:

“As to your not recognizing me, in the first place you might easily have forgotten me by now; and besides, I have had small-pox since last we met, and I daresay my face is a good deal marked.”

“Smallpox? why, how did you manage that?—he has had it, though, by Jove!” cried Velchaninoff. “What a funny fellow you are—however, go on, don't stop.”

Velchaninoff's spirits were rising higher and higher; he was beginning to feel wonderfully light-hearted. That feeling of agitation which had lately so disturbed him had given place to quite a different sentiment. He now began to stride up and down the room, very quickly.

“I was going to say,” resumed Pavel Pavlovitch, “that though I have met you several times, and though I quite intended to come and look you up, when I was arranging my visit to Petersburg, still, I was in that condition of mind, you know, and my wits have so suffered since last March, that——”

“Wits since last March,—yes, go on: wait a minute—do you smoke?”

“Oh—you know, Natalia Vasilievna, never—”

“Quite so; but since March—eh?”

“Well—I might, a cigarette or so.”

“Here you are, then! Light up and go on,—go on! you interest me wonderfully.”

Velchaninoff lit a cigar and sat down on his bed again. Pavel Pavlovitch paused a moment.

“But what a state of agitation you seem to be in yourself!” said he, “are you quite well?”

“Oh, curse my health!” cried Velchaninoff,—“you go on!”

The visitor observed his host's agitation with satisfaction; he went on with his share of the talking with more confidence.

“What am I to go on about?” he asked. “Imagine me, Alexey Ivanovitch—a broken man,—not simply broken, but gone at the root, as it were; a man forced to change his whole manner of living, after twenty years of married life, wandering about the dusty roads without an object,—mind lost—almost oblivious of his own self,—and yet, as it were, taking some sort of intoxicated delight in his loneliness! Isn't it natural that if I should, at such a moment of self-forgetfulness come across a friend—even a *dear* friend, I might prefer to avoid him for that moment? and isn't it equally natural that at another moment I should long to see and speak with some one who has been an eye-witness of, or a partaker, so to speak, in my never-to-be-recalled past? and to rush—not only in the day, but at night, if it so happens,—to rush to the embrace of such a man?—yes, even if one has to wake him up at three in the morning to do it! I was wrong in my time, not in my estimate of my friend, though, for at this moment I feel the full rapture of success; my rash action has been successful: I have found sympathy! As for the time of night, I confess I thought it was not twelve yet! You see, one sups of grief, and it intoxicates one,—at least, not grief, exactly, it's more the condition of mind—the new state of things that affects me.”

“Dear me, how oddly you express yourself!” said Velchaninoff, rising from his seat once more, and becoming quite serious again.

“Oddly, do I? Perhaps.”

“Look here: are you joking?”

“Joking!” cried Pavel Pavlovitch, in shocked surprise; “*joking*—at the very moment when I am telling you of——”

“Oh—be quiet about that! for goodness sake.”

Velchaninoff started off on his journey up and down the room again.

So matters stood for five minutes or so: the visitor seemed inclined to rise from his chair, but Velchaninoff bade him sit still, and Pavel Pavlovitch obediently flopped into his seat again.

“How changed you are!” said the host at last, stopping in front of the other chair, as though suddenly struck with the idea; “fearfully changed!”

“Wonderful! you're quite another man!”

“That's hardly surprising! *nine* years, sir!”

“No, no, no! years have nothing to do with it! it's not in appearance you are so changed: it's something else!”

“Well, sir, the nine years might account for anything.”

“Perhaps it's only since March, eh?”

“Ha-ha! you are playful, sir,” said Pavel Pavlovitch, laughing slyly. “But, if I may ask it, wherein am I so changed?”

“Oh—why, you used to be such a staid, sober, correct Pavel Pavlovitch; such a wise Pavel Pavlovitch; and now you're a good-for-nothing sort of Pavel Pavlovitch.”

Velchaninoff was in that state of irritation when the steadiest, gravest people will sometimes say rather more than they mean.

“Good-for-nothing, am I? and *wise* no longer, I suppose, eh?” chuckled Pavel Pavlovitch, with disagreeable satisfaction.

“Wise, indeed! My dear sir, I'm afraid you are not sober,” replied Velchaninoff; and added to himself, “I am pretty fairly insolent myself, but I can't compare with this little cad! And what on earth is the fellow driving at?”

“Oh, my dear, good, my best of Alexey Ivanovitches,” said the visitor suddenly, most excitedly, and twisting about on his chair, “and why *should* I be sober? We are not moving in the brilliant walks of society—you and I—just now. We are but two dear old friends come together in the full sincerity of perfect love, to recall and talk over that sweet mutual tie of which the dear departed formed so treasured a link in our friendship.”

So saying, the sensitive gentleman became so carried away by his feelings that he bent his head down once more, to hide his emotion, and buried his face in his hat.

Velchaninoff looked on with an uncomfortable feeling of disgust.

“I can't help thinking the man is simply silly,” he thought; “and yet—no, no—his face is so red he must be drunk. But drunk or not drunk, what does the little wretch want with me? That's the puzzle.”

“Do you remember—oh, *don't* you remember—our delightful little evenings—dancing sometimes, or sometimes literary—at Simeon Simeonovitch's?” continued the visitor, gradually removing his hat from before his face, and apparently growing more and more enthusiastic over the memories of the past, “and our little readings—you and she and myself—and our first meeting, when you came in to ask for information about something connected with your business in the town, and commenced shouting angrily at me; don't you remember—when suddenly in came Natalia Vasilievna, and within ten minutes you were our dear friend, and so remained for exactly a year? Just like Turgenieff's story ‘The Provincialka!’ ”

Velchaninoff had continued his walk up and down the room during this *tirade*, with his eyes on the ground, listening impatiently and with disgust—but listening *hard*, all the same.

“It never struck me to think of 'The Provincialka' in connection with the matter,” he interrupted. “And look here, why do you talk in that sneaking, whining sort of voice? You never used to do that. Your whole manner is unlike yourself.”

“Quite so, quite so. I used to be more silent, I know. I used to love to listen while others talked. You remember how well the dear departed talked—the wit and grace of her conversation. As to The Provincialka, I remember she and I used often to compare your friendship for us to certain episodes in that piece, and especially to the doings of one Stupendief. It really was remarkably like that character and his doings.”

“What Stupendief do you mean, confound it all?” cried Velchaninoff, stamping his foot with rage. The name seemed to have evoked certain most irritating thoughts in his mind.

“Why, Stupendief, don't you know, the ‘husband’ in ‘Provincialka,’ ” whined Pavel Pavlovitch, in the very sweetest of tones; “but that belongs to another set of fond memories—after you departed, in fact, when Mr. Bagantoff had honoured us with his friendship, just as you had done before him, only that his lasted five whole years.”

“Bagantoff? What Bagantoff? Do you mean that same Bagantoff who was serving down in your town? Why, he also——”

“Yes, yes! quite so. He also, he also!” cried the enthusiastic Pavel Pavlovitch, seizing upon Velchaninoff's accidental slip. “Of course! So that there you are—there's the

whole company. Bagantoff played the ‘count,’ the dear departed was the ‘Provincialka,’ and I was the ‘husband,’ only that the part was taken away from me, for incapacity, I suppose!”

“Yes; fancy *you* a Stupendief. You're a—you're first a Pavel Pavlovitch Trusotsky!” said Velchaninoff, contemptuously, and very unceremoniously. “But look here! Bagantoff is in town; I know he is, for I have seen him. Why don't you go to see *him* as well as myself?”

“My dear sir, I've been there every day for the last three weeks. He won't receive me; he's ill, and can't receive! And, do you know, I have found out that he really is very ill! Fancy my feelings—a five-year's friend! Oh, my dear Alexey Ivanovitch! you don't know what my feelings are in my present condition of mind. I assure you, at one moment I long for the earth to open and swallow me up, and the next I feel that I *must* find one of those old friends, eyewitnesses of the past, as it were, if only to weep on his bosom, only to weep, sir—give you my word.”

“Well, that's about enough for to-night; don't you think so?” said Velchaninoff, cuttingly.

“Oh, too—too much!” cried the other, rising. “It must be four o'clock; and here am I agitating your feelings in the most selfish way.”

“Now, look here; I shall call upon you myself, and I hope that you will then——but, tell me honestly, are you drunk to-night?”

“Drunk! not the least in the world!”

“Did you drink nothing before you came here, or earlier?”

“Do you know, my dear Alexey Ivanovitch, you are quite in a high fever!”

“Good-night. I shall call to-morrow.”

“And I have noticed it all the evening, really quite delirious!” continued Pavel Pavlovitch, licking his lips, as it were, with satisfaction as he pursued this theme. “I am really quite ashamed that I should have allowed myself to be so awkward as to agitate you. Well, well; I'm going! Now you must lie down at once and go to sleep.”

“You haven't told me where you live,” shouted Velchaninoff after him as he left the room.

“Oh, didn't I? Pokrofsky Hotel.”

Pavel Pavlovitch was out on the stairs now.

“Stop!” cried Velchaninoff, once more. “You are not ‘running away,’ are you?”

“How do you mean, ‘running away?’ ” asked Pavel Pavlovitch, turning round at the third step, and grinning back at him, with his eyes staring very wide open.

Instead of replying, Velchaninoff banged the door fiercely, locked and bolted it, and went fuming back into his room. Arrived there, he spat on the ground, as though to get rid of the taste of something loathsome.

He then stood motionless for at least five minutes, in the centre of the room; after which he threw himself upon his bed, and fell asleep in an instant.

The forgotten candle burned itself out in its socket.

CHAPTER IV.

Velchaninoff slept soundly until half-past nine, at which hour he started up, sat down on the side of his bed, and began to think.

His thoughts quickly fixed themselves upon the death of “that woman.”

The agitating impression wrought upon his mind by yesterday's news as to her death had left a painful feeling of mental perturbation.

This morning the whole of the events of nine years back stood out before his mind's eye with extraordinary distinctness.

He had loved this woman, Natalia Vasilievna—Trusotsky's wife,—he had loved her, and had acted the part of her lover during the time which he had spent in their provincial town (while engaged in business connected with a legacy); he had lived there a whole year, though his business did not require by any means so long a visit; in fact, the tie above mentioned had detained him in the place.

He had been so completely under the influence of this passion, that Natalia Vasilievna had held him in a species of slavery. He would have obeyed the slightest whim or the wildest caprice of the woman, at that time. He had never, before or since, experienced anything approaching to the infatuation she had caused.

When the time came for departing, Velchaninoff had been in a state of such absolute despair, though the parting was to have been but a short one, that he had begged Natalia Vasilievna to leave all and fly across the frontier with him; and it was only by laughing him out of the idea (though she had at first encouraged it herself, probably for

a joke), and by unmercifully chaffing him, that the lady eventually persuaded Velchaninoff to depart alone.

However, he had not been a couple of months in St. Petersburg before he found himself asking himself that question which he had never to this day been able to answer satisfactorily, namely, "*Did* he love this woman at all, or was it nothing but the infatuation of the moment?" He did not ask this question because he was conscious of any new passion taking root in his heart; on the contrary, during those first two months in town he had been in that condition of mind that he had not so much as looked at a woman, though he had met hundreds, and had returned to his old society ways at once. And yet he knew perfectly well that if he were to return to T—— he would instantly fall into the meshes of his passion for Natalia Vasilievna once more, in spite of the question which he could not answer as to the reality of his love for her.

Five years later he was as convinced of this fact as ever, although the very thought of it was detestable to him, and although he did not remember the name of Natalia Vasilievna but with loathing.

He was ashamed of that episode at T——. He could not understand how he (Velchaninoff) could ever have allowed himself to become the victim of such a stupid passion. He blushed whenever he thought of the shameful business—blushed, and even wept for shame.

He managed to forget his remorse after a few more years—he felt sure that he had "lived it down;" and yet now, after nine years, here was the whole thing resuscitated by the news of Natalia's death.

At all events, however, now, as he sat on his bed with agitating thoughts swarming through his brain, he could not but feel that the fact of her being dead was a consolation, amidst all the painful reflections which the mention of her name had called up.

"Surely I am a little sorry for her?" he asked himself.

Well, he certainly did not feel that sensation of hatred for her now; he could think of her and judge her now without passion of any kind, and therefore more justly.

He had long since been of opinion that in all probability there had been nothing more in Natalia Vasilievna than is to be found in every lady of good provincial society, and that he himself had created the whole "fantasy" of his worship and her worshipfulness; but though he had formed this opinion, he always doubted its correctness, and he still felt that doubt now. Facts existed to contradict the theory. For

instance, this Bagantoff had lived for several years at T——, and had been no less a victim to passion for this woman, and had been as helpless as Velchaninoff himself under her witchery. Bagantoff, though a young idiot (as Velchaninoff expressed it), was nevertheless a scion of the very highest society in St. Petersburg. His career was in St. Petersburg, and it was significant that such a man should have wasted five important years of his life at T—— simply out of love for this woman. It was said that he had only returned to Petersburg even then because the lady had had enough of him; so that, all things considered, there must have been something which rendered Natalia Vasilievna preeminently attractive among women.

Yet the woman was not rich; she was not even pretty (if not absolutely *plain*!) Velchaninoff had known her when she was twenty-eight years old. Her face was capable of taking a pleasing expression, but her eyes were not good—they were too hard. She was a thin, bony woman to look at. Her mind was intelligent, but narrow and one-sided. She had tact and taste, especially as to dress. Her character was firm and overbearing. She was never wrong (in her own opinion) or unjust. The unfaithfulness towards her husband never caused her the slightest remorse; she hated corruption, and yet she was herself corrupt; and she believed in herself absolutely. Nothing could ever have persuaded her that she herself was actually depraved; Velchaninoff believed that she really did not know that her own corruption was corrupt. He considered her to be "one of those women who only exist to be unfaithful wives." Such women never remain unmarried,—it is the law of their nature to marry,—their husband is their first lover, and he is always to blame for anything that may happen afterwards; the unfaithful wife herself being invariably *absolutely* in the right, and of course perfectly innocent.

So thought Velchaninoff; and he was convinced that such a type of woman actually existed; but he was no less convinced that there also existed a corresponding type of men, born to be the husbands of such women. In his opinion the mission of such men was to be, so to speak, "permanent husbands,"—that is, to be husbands all their lives, and nothing else.

Velchaninoff had not the smallest doubt as to the existence of these two types, and Pavel Pavlovitch Trusotsky was, in his opinion, an excellent representative of the male type. Of course, the Pavel Pavlovitch of last night was by no means the same Pavel Pavlovitch as he had known at T——. He had found an extraordinary change in the man; and yet, on reflection, he was bound to admit that the change was but natural, for that he could only have remained what he was so long as his wife lived; and that now he was but a part of a whole, allowed to wander at will—that is, an imperfect being, a surprising, an incomprehensible sort of a *thing*, without proper balance.

As for the Pavel Pavlovitch of T——, this is what Velchaninoff remembered of him:

Pavel Pavlovitch had been a husband, of course,—a formality,—and that was all. If, for instance, he was a clerk of department besides, he was so merely in his capacity of, and as a part of his responsibility as—a husband. He worked for his wife, and for her social position. He had been thirty-five years old at that time, and was possessed of some considerable property. He had not shown any special talent, nor, on the other hand, any marked incapacity in his professional employment; his position had been decidedly a good one.

Natalia Vasilievna had been respected and looked up to by all; not that she valued their respect in the least,—she considered it merely as her due. She was a good hostess, and had schooled Pavel Pavlovitch into polite manners, so that he was able to receive and entertain the very best society passably well.

He might be a clever man, for all Velchaninoff knew, but as Natalia Vasilievna did not like her husband to talk much, there was little opportunity of judging. He may have had many good qualities, as well as bad; but the good ones were, so to speak, kept put away in their cases, and the bad ones were stifled and not allowed to appear. Velchaninoff remembered, for instance, that Pavel Pavlovitch had once or twice shown a disposition to laugh at those about him, but this unworthy proclivity had been very promptly subdued. He had been fond of telling stories, but this was not allowed either; or, if permitted at all, the anecdote was to be of the shortest and most uninteresting description.

Pavel Pavlovitch had a circle of private friends outside the house, with whom he was fain, at times, to taste the flowing bowl; but this vicious tendency was radically stamped out as soon as possible.

And yet, with all this, Natalia Vasilievna appeared, to the uninitiated, to be the most obedient of wives, and doubtless considered herself so. Pavel Pavlovitch may have been desperately in love with her,—no one could say as to this.

Velchaninoff had frequently asked himself during his life at T——, whether Pavel Pavlovitch ever suspected his wife of having formed the tie with himself, of which mention has been made. Velchaninoff had several times questioned Natalia Vasilievna on this point, seriously enough; but had invariably been told, with some show of annoyance, that her husband neither did know, nor ever could know; and that “all there might be to know was not his business!”

Another trait in her character was that she never laughed at Pavel Pavlovitch, and never found him funny in any sense; and that she would have been down on any person who dared to be rude to him, at once!

Pavel Pavlovitch's reference to the pleasant little readings enjoyed by the trio nine years ago was accurate; they used to read Dickens' novels together. Velchaninoff or Trusotsky reading aloud, while Natalia Vasilievna worked. The life at T—— had ended suddenly, and so far as Velchaninoff was concerned, in a way which drove him almost to the verge of madness. The fact is, he was simply turned out—although it was all managed in such a way that he never observed that he was being thrown over like an old worn-out shoe.

A young artillery officer had appeared in the town a month or so before Velchaninoff's departure and had made acquaintance with the Trusotsky's. The trio became a quartet. Before long Velchaninoff was informed that for many reasons a separation was absolutely necessary; Natalia Vasilievna adduced a hundred excellent reasons why this had become unavoidable—and especially one which quite settled the matter. After his stormy attempt to persuade Natalia Vasilievna to fly with him to Paris—or anywhere,—Velchaninoff had ended by going to St. Petersburg alone—for two or three months at the *very most*, as he said,—otherwise he would refuse to go at all, in spite of every reason and argument Natalia might adduce.

Exactly two months later Velchaninoff had received a letter from Natalia Vasilievna, begging him to come no more to T——, because that she already loved another. As to the principal reason which she had brought forward in favour of his immediate departure, she now informed him that she had made a mistake. Velchaninoff remembered the young artilleryman, and understood,—and so the matter had ended, once and for all. A year or two after this Bagantoff appeared at T——, and an intimacy between Natalia Vasilievna and the former had sprung up which lasted for five years. This long period of constancy, Velchaninoff attributed to advancing age on the part of Natalia. He sat on the side of his bed for nearly an hour and thought. At last he roused himself, rang for Mavra and his coffee, drank it off quickly—dressed—and punctually at eleven was on his way to the Pokrofsky Hotel: he felt rather ashamed of his behaviour to Pavel Pavlovitch last night. Velchaninoff put down all that phantasmagoria of the trying of the lock and so on to Pavel Pavlovitch's drunken condition and to other reasons,—but he did not know why he was now on his way to make fresh relations with the husband of that woman, since their acquaintanceship and intercourse had come to so natural and simple a termination; yet something seemed to draw him thither—some strong current of impulse,—and he went.