A House of Gentlefolk

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I

A bright spring day was fading into evening. High overhead in the clear heavens small rosy clouds seemed hardly to move across the sky but to be sinking into its depths of blue.

In a handsome house in one of the outlying streets of the government town of O—— (it was in the year 1842) two women were sitting at an open window; one was about fifty, the other an old lady of seventy.

The name of the former was Marya Dmitrievna Kalitin. Her husband, a shrewd determined man of obstinate bilious temperament, had been dead for ten years. He had been a provincial public prosecutor, noted in his own day as a successful man of business. He had received a fair education and had been to the university; but having been born in narrow circumstances he realized early in life the necessity of pushing his own way in the world and making money. It had been a love-match on Marya Dmitrievna's side. He was not bad-looking, was clever and could be very agreeable when he chose. Marya Dmitrievna Pesto—that was her maiden name—had lost her parents in childhood. She spent some years in a boarding-school in Moscow, and after leaving school, lived on the family estate of Pokrovskoe, about forty miles from O——, with her aunt and her elder brother. This brother soon after obtained a post in Petersburg, and made them a scanty allowance. He treated his aunt and sister very shabbily till his sudden death cut short his career.

Marya Dmitrievna inherited Pokrovskoe, but she did not live there long. Two years after her marriage with Kalitin, who succeeded in winning her heart in a few days, Pokrovskoe was exchanged for another estate, which yielded a much larger income, but was utterly unattractive and had no house. At the same time Kalitin took a house in the town of O——, in which he and his wife took up their permanent abode. There was a large garden round the house, which on one side looked out upon the open country away from the town.

"And so," decided Kalitin, who had a great distaste for the quiet of country life, "there would be no need for them to be dragging themselves off into the country." In her heart Marya Dmitrievna more than once regretted her pretty Pokrovskoe, with its babbling brook, its wide meadows, and green copses; but she never opposed her husband in anything and had the greatest veneration for his wisdom and knowledge of the world. When after fifteen years of married life he died leaving her with a son and two daughters, Marya Dmitrievna had grown so accustomed to her house and to town life that she had no inclination to leave O——.

In her youth Marya Dmitrievna had always been spoken of as a pretty blonde; and at fifty her features had not lost all charm, though they

were somewhat coarser and less delicate in outline. She was more sentimental than kindhearted; and even at her mature age, she retained the manners of the boarding-school. She was self-indulgent and easily put out, even moved to tears when she was crossed in any of her habits. She was, however, very sweet and agreeable when all her wishes were carried out and none opposed her. Her house was among the pleasantest in the town. She had a considerable fortune, not so much from her own property as from her husband's savings. Her two daughters were living with her; her son was being educated in one of the best government schools in Petersburg.

The old lady sitting with Marya Dmitrievna at the window was her father's sister, the same aunt with whom she had once spent some solitary years in Pokrovskoe. Her name was Marfa Timofyevna Pestov. She had a reputation for eccentricity as she was a woman of an independent character, told every one the truth to his face, and even in the most straitened circumstances behaved just as if she had a fortune at her disposal. She could not endure Kalitin, and directly her niece married him, she removed to her little property, where for ten whole years she lived in a smoky peasants' hut. Marya Dmitrievna was a little afraid of her. A little sharp-nosed woman with black hair and keen eyes even in her old age, Marfa Timofyevna walked briskly, held herself upright and spoke quickly and clearly in a sharp ringing voice. She always wore a white cap and a white dressing-jacket.

"What's the matter with you?" she asked Marya Dmitrievna suddenly. "What are you sighing about, pray?"

"Nothing," answered the latter. "What exquisite clouds!"

"You feel sorry for them, eh?"

Marya Dmitrievna made no reply.

"Why is it Gedeonovsky does not come?" observed Marfa Timofyevna, moving her knitting needles quickly. (She was knitting a large woolen scarf.) "He would have sighed with you—or at least he'd have had some fib to tell you."

"How hard you always are on him! Sergei Petrovitch is a worthy man."

"Worthy!" repeated the old lady scornfully.

"And how devoted he was to my poor husband!" observed Marya Dmitrievna; "even now he cannot speak of him without emotion."

"And no wonder! It was he who picked him out of the gutter," muttered Marfa Timofyevna, and her knitting needles moved faster than ever.

"He looks so meek and mild," she began again, "with his grey head, but he no sooner opens his mouth than out comes a lie or a slander. And to think of his having the rank of a councillor! To be sure, though, he's only a village priest's son."

"Every one has faults, auntie; that is his weak point, no doubt. Sergei Petrovitch has had no education: of course he does not speak French, still, say what you like, he is an agreeable man."

“Yes, he is always ready to kiss your hands. He does not speak French—that’s no great loss. I am not over strong in the French lingo myself. It would be better if he could not speak at all; he would not tell lies then. But here he is—speak of the devil,” added Marfa Timofyevna looking into the street. “Here comes your agreeable man striding along. What a lanky creature he is, just like a stork!”
Marya Dmitrievna began to arrange her curls. Marfa Timofyevna looked at her ironically.
“What’s that, not a grey hair surely? You must speak to your Palashka, what can she be thinking about?”
“Really, auntie, you are always so...” muttered Marya Dmitrievna in a tone of vexation, drumming on the arm of her chair with her finger-tips.
“Sergei Petrovitch Gedeonovsky!” was announced in a shrill piping voice, by a rosy-cheeked little page who made his appearance at the door.

II

A tall man entered, wearing a tidy overcoat, rather short trousers, grey doeskin gloves, and two neckties—a black one outside, and a white one below it. There was an air of decorum and propriety in everything about him, from his prosperous countenance and smoothly brushed hair, to his low-heeled, noiseless boots. He bowed first to the lady of the house, then to Marfa Timofyevna, and slowly drawing off his gloves, he advanced to take Marya Dmitrievna's hand. After kissing it respectfully twice he seated himself with deliberation in an arm-chair, and rubbing the very tips of his fingers together, he observed with a smile—
"And is Elisaveta Mihalovna quite well?"
"Yes," replied Marya Dmitrievna, "she's in the garden."
"And Elena Mihalovna?"
"Lenotchka's in the garden too. Is there no news?"
"There is indeed!" replied the visitor, slowly blinking his eyes and pursing up his mouth. "Hm!... yes, indeed, there is a piece of news, and very surprising news too. Lavretsky—Fedor Ivanitch is here."
"Fedya!" cried Marfa Timofyevna. "Are you sure you are not romancing, my good man?"
"No, indeed, I saw him myself."
"Well, that does not prove it."
"Fedor Ivanitch looked much more robust," continued Gedeonovsky, affecting not to have heard Marfa Timofyevna's last remark. "Fedor Ivanitch is broader and has quite a colour."
"He looked more robust," said Marya Dmitrievna, dwelling on each syllable. "I should have thought he had little enough to make him look robust."
"Yes, indeed," observed Gedeonovsky; "any other man in Fedor Ivanitch's position would have hesitated to appear in society."
"Why so, pray?" interposed Marfa Timofyevna. "What nonsense are you talking! The man's come back to his home—where would you have him go? And has he been to blame, I should like to know!"
"The husband is always to blame, madam, I venture to assure you, when a wife misconducts herself."
"You say that, my good sir, because you have never been married yourself." Gedeonovsky listened with a forced smile.
"If I may be so inquisitive," he asked, after a short pause, "for whom is that pretty scarf intended?"
Marfa Timofyevna gave him a sharp look.
"It's intended," she replied, "for a man who does not talk scandal, nor play the hypocrite, nor tell lies, if there's such a man to be found in the

world. I know Fedya well; he was only to blame in being too good to his wife. To be sure, he married for love, and no good ever comes of those love-matches," added the old lady, with a sidelong glance at Marya Dmitrievna, as she got up from her place. "And now, my good sir, you may attack any one you like, even me if you choose; I'm going. I will not hinder you." And Marfa Timofyevna walked away.
"That's always how she is," said Marya Dmitrievna, following her aunt with her eyes.
"We must remember your aunt's age...there's no help for it," replied Gedeonovsky. "She spoke of a man not playing the hypocrite. But who is not hypocritical nowadays? It's the age we live in. One of my friends, a most worthy man, and, I assure you, a man of no mean position, used to say, that nowadays the very hens can't pick up a grain of corn without hypocrisy—they always approach it from one side. But when I look at you, dear lady—your character is so truly angelic; let me kiss your little snow-white hand!"
Marya Dmitrievna with a faint smile held out her plump hand to him with the little finger held apart from the rest. He pressed his lips to it, and she drew her chair nearer to him, and bending a little towards him, asked in an undertone—
"So you saw him? Was he really—all right—quite well and cheerful?"
"Yes, he was well and cheerful," replied Gedeonovsky in a whisper.
"You haven't heard where his wife is now?"
"She was lately in Paris; now, they say, she has gone away to Italy."
"It is terrible, indeed—Fedya's position; I wonder how he can bear it. Every one, of course, has trouble; but he, one may say, has been made the talk of all Europe."
Gedeonovsky sighed.
"Yes, indeed, yes, indeed. They do say, you know that she associates with artists and musicians, and as the saying is, with strange creatures of all kinds. She has lost all sense of shame completely."
"I am deeply, deeply grieved." said Marya Dmitrievna. "On account of our relationship. You know, Sergei Petrovitch, he's my cousin many times removed."
"Of course, of course. Don't I know everything that concerns your family? I should hope so, indeed."
"Will he come to see us—what do you think?"
"One would suppose so; though, they say, he is intending to go home to his country place."
Mary Dmitrievna lifted her eyes to heaven.
"Ah, Sergei Petrovitch, Sergei Petrovitch, when I think how careful we women ought to be in our conduct!"
"There are women and women, Marya Dmitrievna. There are unhappily such ... of flighty character... and at a certain age too, and then they are not brought up in good principles." (Sergei Petrovitch drew a blue

checked handkerchief out of his pocket and began to unfold it.) “There are such women, no doubt.” (Sergei Petrovitch applied a corner of the handkerchief first to one and then to the other eye.) “But speaking generally, if one takes into consideration, I mean...the dust in the town is really extraordinary to-day,” he wound up.
“Maman, maman,” cried a pretty little girl of eleven running into the room, “Vladimir Nikolaitch is coming on horseback!”
Marya Dmitrievna got up; Sergei Petrovitch also rose and made a bow.
“Our humble respects to Elena Mihalovna,” he said, and turning aside into a corner for good manners, he began blowing his long straight nose.
“What a splendid horse he has!” continued the little girl. “He was at the gate just now, he told Lisa and me he would dismount at the steps.”
The sound of hoofs was heard; and a graceful young man, riding a beautiful bay horse, was seen in the street, and stopped at the open window.

III

“How do you do, Marya Dmitrievna?” cried the young man in a pleasant, ringing voice. “How do you like my new purchase?”
Marya Dmitrievna went up to the window.
“How do you do, Woldemar! Ah, what a splendid horse! Where did you buy it?”
“I bought it from the army contractor.... He made me pay for it too, the brigand!”
“What’s its name?”
“Orlando.... But it’s a stupid name; I want to change.... Eh bien, eh bien, mon garcon.... What a restless beast it is!” The horse snorted, pawed the ground, and shook the foam off the bit.
“Lenotchka, stroke him, don’t be afraid.”
The little girl stretched her hand out of the window, but Orlando suddenly reared and started. The rider with perfect self-possession gave it a cut with the whip across the neck, and keeping a tight grip with his legs forced it in spite of its opposition, to stand still again at the window.
“Prenez garde, prenez garde,” Marya Dmitrievna kept repeating.
“Lenotchka, pat him,” said the young man, “I won’t let him be perverse.”
The little girl again stretched out her hand and timidly patted the quivering nostrils of the horse, who kept fidgeting and champing the bit.
“Bravo!” cried Marya Dmitrievna, “but now get off and come in to us.”
The rider adroitly turned his horse, gave him a touch of the spur, and galloping down the street soon reached the courtyard. A minute later he ran into the drawing-room by the door from the hall, flourishing his whip; at the same moment there appeared in the other doorway a tall, slender dark-haired girl of nineteen, Marya Dmitrievna’s eldest daughter, Lisa.

IV

The name of the young man whom we have just introduced to the reader was Vladimir Nikolaitch Panshin. He served in Petersburg on special commissions in the department of internal affairs. He had come to the town of O—— to carry out some temporary government commissions, and was in attendance on the Governor-General Zonnenberg, to whom he happened to be distantly related. Panshin's father, a retired cavalry officer and a notorious gambler, was a man with insinuating eyes, a battered countenance, and a nervous twitch about the mouth. He spent his whole life hanging about the aristocratic world; frequented the English clubs of both capitals, and had the reputation of a smart, not very trustworthy, but jolly good-natured fellow. In spite of his smartness, he was almost always on the brink of ruin, and the property he left his son was small and heavily-encumbered. To make up for that, however, he did exert himself, after his own fashion, over his son's education. Vladimir Nikolaitch spoke French very well, English well, and German badly; that is the proper thing; fashionable people would be ashamed to speak German well; but to utter an occasional—generally a humorous—phrase in German is quite correct, c'est meme tres chic, as the Parisians of Petersburg express themselves. By the time he was fifteen, Vladimir knew how to enter any drawing-room without embarrassment, how to move about in it gracefully and to leave it at the appropriate moment. Panshin's father gained many connections for his son. He never lost an opportunity, while shuffling the cards between two rubbers, or playing a successful trump, of dropping a hint about his Volodka to any personage of importance who was a devotee of cards. And Vladimir, too, during his residence at the university, which he left without a very brilliant degree, formed an acquaintance with several young men of quality, and gained an entry into the best houses. He was received cordially everywhere: he was very good-looking, easy in his manners, amusing, always in good health, and ready for everything; respectful, when he ought to be; insolent, when he dared to be; excellent company, un charmant garcon. The promised land lay before him. Panshin quickly learnt the secret of getting on in the world; he knew how to yield with genuine respect to its decrees; he knew how to take up trifles with half ironical seriousness, and to appear to regard everything serious as trifling; he was a capital dancer; and dressed in the English style. In a short time he gained the reputation of being one of the smartest and most attractive young men in Petersburg.

Panshin was indeed very smart, not less so than his father; but he was also very talented. He did everything well; he sang charmingly, sketched with spirit, wrote verses, and was a very fair actor. He was only twenty-

eight, and he was already a kammer-yunker, and had a very good position. Panshin had complete confidence in himself, in his own intelligence, and his own penetration; he made his way with light-hearted assurance, everything went smoothly with him. He was used to being liked by every one, old and young, and imagined that he understood people, especially women: he certainly understood their ordinary weaknesses. As a man of artistic leanings, he was conscious of a capacity for passion, for being carried away, even for enthusiasm, and consequently, he permitted himself various irregularities; he was dissipated, associated with persons not belonging to good society, and, in general, conducted himself in a free and easy manner; but at heart he was cold and false, and at the moment of the most boisterous revelry his sharp brown eye was always alert, taking everything in. This bold, independent young man could never forget himself and be completely carried away. To his credit it must be said, that he never boasted of his conquests. He had found his way into Marya Dmitrievna's house immediately he arrived in O——, and was soon perfectly at home there. Marya Dmitrievna absolutely adored him. Panshin exchanged cordial greetings with every one in the room; he shook hands with Marya Dmitrievna and Lisaveta Mihalovna, clapped Gedeonovsky lightly on the shoulder, and turning round on his heels, put his hand on Lenotchka's head and kissed her on the forehead.

"Aren't you afraid to ride such a vicious horse?" Marya Dmitrievna questioned him.

"I assure you he's very quiet, but I will tell you what I am afraid of: I'm afraid to play preference with Sergei Petrovitch; yesterday he cleaned me out of everything at Madame Byelenitsin's."

Gedeonovsky gave a thin, sympathetic little laugh; he was anxious to be in favour with the brilliant young official from Petersburg—the governor's favourite. In conversation with Marya Dmitrievna, he often alluded to Panshin's remarkable abilities. Indeed, he used to argue, how can one help admiring him? The young man is making his way in the highest spheres, he is an exemplary official, and not a bit of pride about him. And, in fact, even in Petersburg Panshin was reckoned a capable official; he got through a great deal of work; he spoke of it lightly as befits a man of the world who does not attach any special importance to his labours, but he never hesitated in carrying out orders. The authorities like such subordinates; he himself had no doubt, that if he chose, he could be a minister in time.

"You are pleased to say that I cleaned you out," replied Gedeonovsky; "but who was it won twelve roubles of me last week and more?"...

"You're a malicious fellow," Panshin interrupted, with genial but somewhat contemptuous carelessness, and, paying him no further attention, he went up to Lisa.

“I cannot get the overture of Oberon here,” he began. “Madame Byelenitsin was boasting when she said she had all the classical music: in reality she has nothing but polkas and waltzes, but I have already written to Moscow, and within a week you will have the overture. By the way,” he went on, “I wrote a new song yesterday, the words too are mine, would you care for me to sing it? I don’t know how far it is successful. Madame Byelenitsin thought it very pretty, but her words mean nothing. I should like to know what you think of it. But, I think, though, that had better be later on.”
“Why later on?” interposed Marya Dmitrievna, “why not now?”
“I obey,” replied Panshin, with a peculiar bright and sweet smile, which came and went suddenly on his face. He drew up a chair with his knee, sat down to the piano, and striking a few chords began to sing, articulating the words clearly, the following song—
Above the earth the moon floats high
Amid pale clouds;
Its magic light in that far sky
Yet stirs the floods.

My heart has found a moon to rule
Its stormy sea;
To joy and sorrow it is moved
Only by thee.

My soul is full of love’s cruel smart,
And longing vain;
But thou art calm, as that cold moon,
That knows not pain.
The second couplet was sung by Panshin with special power and expression, the sound of waves was heard in the stormy accompaniment. After the words “and longing vain,” he sighed softly, dropped his eyes and let his voice gradually die away, morendo. When he had finished, Lisa praised the motive, Marya Dmitrievna cried, “Charming!” but Gedeonovsky went so far as to exclaim, “Ravishing poetry, and music equally ravishing!” Lenotchka looked with childish reverence at the singer. In short, every one present was delighted with the young dilettante’s composition; but at the door leading into the drawing-room from the hall stood an old man, who had only just come in, and who, to judge by the expression of his downcast face and the shrug of his shoulders, was by no means pleased with Panshin’s song, pretty though it was. After waiting a moment and flicking the dust off his boots with a coarse pocket-handkerchief, this man suddenly raised his eyes, compressed his lips with a morose expression, and his stooping figure bent forward, he entered the drawing-room.

“Ah! Christopher Fedoritch, how are you?” exclaimed Panshin before any of the others could speak, and he jumped up quickly from his seat. “I had no suspicion that you were here—nothing would have induced me to sing my song before you. I know you are no lover of light music.”
“I did not hear it,” declared the new-comer, in very bad Russian, and exchanging greetings with every one, he stood awkwardly in the middle of the room.
“Have you come, Monsieur Lemm,” said Marya Dmitrievna, “to give Lisa her music lesson?”
“No, not Lisaveta Mihalovna, but Elena Mihalovna.”
“Oh! very well. Lenotchka, go up-stairs with Mr. Lemm.”
The old man was about to follow the little girl, but Panshin stopped him.
“Don’t go after the lesson, Christopher Fedoritch,” he said. “Lisa Mihalovna and I are going to play a duet of Beethoven’s sonata.”
The old man muttered some reply, and Panshin continued in German, mispronouncing the words—
“Lisaveta Mihalovna showed me the religious cantata you dedicated to her—a beautiful thing! Pray, do not suppose that I cannot appreciate serious music—quite the contrary: it is tedious sometimes, but then it is very elevating.”
The old man crimsoned to his ears, and with a sidelong look at Lisa, he hurriedly went out of the room.
Marya Dmitrievna asked Panshin to sing his song again; but he protested that he did not wish to torture the ears of the musical German, and suggested to Lisa that they should attack Beethoven’s sonata. Then Marya Dmitrievna heaved a sigh, and in her turn suggested to Gedeonovsky a walk in the garden. “I should like,” she said, “to have a little more talk, and to consult you about our poor Fedya.” Gedeonovsky bowed with a smirk, and with two fingers picked up his hat, on the brim of which his gloves had been tidily laid, and went away with Marya Dmitrievna. Panshin and Lisa remained alone in the room; she fetched the sonata, and opened it; both seated themselves at the piano in silence. Overhead were heard the faint sounds of scales, played by the uncertain fingers of Lenotchka.

V

Christopher Theodor Gottlieb Lemm was born in 1786 in the town of Chemnitz in Saxony. His parents were poor musicians. His father played the French horn, his mother the harp; he himself was practising on three different instruments by the time he was five. At eight years old he was left an orphan, and from his tenth year he began to earn his bread by his art. He led a wandering life for many years, and performed everywhere in restaurants, at fairs, at peasants' weddings, and at balls. At last he got into an orchestra and constantly rising in it, he obtained the position of director. He was rather a poor performer; but he understood music thoroughly. At twenty-eight he migrated into Russia, on the invitation of a great nobleman, who did not care for music himself, but kept an orchestra for show. Lemm lived with him seven years in the capacity of orchestra conductor, and left him empty-handed. The nobleman was ruined, he intended to give him a promissory note, but in the sequel refused him even that—in short, did not pay him a farthing. He was advised to go away; but he was unwilling to return home in poverty from Russia, that great Russia which is a mine of gold for artists; he decided to remain and try his luck. For twenty years the poor German had been trying his luck; he had lived in various gentlemen's houses, had suffered and put up with much, had faced privation, had struggled like a fish on the ice; but the idea of returning to his own country never left him among all the hardships he endured; it was this dream alone that sustained him. But fate did not see fit to grant him this last and first happiness: at fifty, broken-down in health and prematurely aged, he drifted to the town of O——, and remained there for good, having now lost once for all every hope of leaving Russia, which he detested. He gained his poor livelihood somehow by lessons. Lemm's exterior was not prepossessing. He was short and bent, with crooked shoulders, and contracted chest, with large flat feet, and bluish white nails on the gnarled bony fingers of his sinewy red hands. He had a wrinkled face, sunken cheeks, and compressed lips, which he was for ever twitching and biting; and this, together with his habitual taciturnity, produced an impression almost sinister. His grey hair hung in tufts on his low brow; like smouldering embers, his little set eyes glowed with dull fire. He moved painfully, at every step swinging his ungainly body forward. Some of his movements recalled the clumsy actions of an owl in a cage when it feels that it is being looked at, but itself can hardly see out of its great yellow eyes timorously and drowsily blinking. Pitiless, prolonged sorrow had laid its indelible stamp on the poor musician; it had disfigured and deformed his person, by no means attractive to begin with. But any one who was able to get over the first

impression would have discerned something good, and honest, and out of the common in this half-shattered creature. A devoted admirer of Bach and Handel, a master of his art, gifted with a lively imagination and that boldness of conception which is only vouchsafed to the German race, Lemm might, in time—who knows?—have taken rank with the great composers of his fatherland, had his life been different; but he was born under an unlucky star! He had written much in his life, and it had not been granted to him to see one of his compositions produced; he did not know how to set about things in the right way, to gain favour in the right place, and to make a push at the right moment. A long, long time ago, his one friend and admirer, also a German and also poor, had published two of Lemm's sonatas at his own expense—the whole edition remained on the shelves of the music-shops; they disappeared without a trace, as though they had been thrown into a river by night. At last Lemm had renounced everything; the years too did their work; his mind had grown hard and stiff, as his fingers had stiffened. He lived alone in a little cottage not far from the Kalitin's house, with an old cook he had taken out of the poorhouse (he had never married). He took long walks, and read the Bible and the Protestant version of the Psalms, and Shakespeare in Schlegel's translation. He had composed nothing for a long time; but apparently, Lisa, his best pupil, had been able to inspire him; he had written for her the cantata to which Panshin had! made allusion. The words of this cantata he had borrowed from his collection of hymns. He had added a few verses of his own. It was sung by two choruses—a chorus of the happy and a chorus of the unhappy. The two were brought into harmony at the end, and sang together, "Merciful God, have pity on us sinners, and deliver us from all evil thoughts and earthly hopes." On the title-page was the inscription, most carefully written and even illuminated, "Only the righteous are justified. A religious cantata. Composed and dedicated to Miss Elisaveta Kalitin, his dear pupil, by her teacher, C. T. G. Lemm." The words, "Only the righteous are justified" and "Elisaveta Kalitin," were encircled by rays. Below was written: "For you alone, fur Sie allein." This was why Lemm had grown red, and looked reproachfully at Lisa; he was deeply wounded when Panshin spoke of his cantata before him.