

The Kreutzer

Sonata



Leo Tolstoy

1

Travellers left and entered our car at every stopping of the train. Three persons, however, remained, bound, like myself, for the farthest station: a lady neither young nor pretty, smoking cigarettes, with a thin face, a cap on her head, and wearing a semi-masculine outer garment; then her companion, a very loquacious gentleman of about forty years, with baggage entirely new and arranged in an orderly manner; then a gentleman who held himself entirely aloof, short in stature, very nervous, of uncertain age, with bright eyes, not pronounced in color, but extremely attractive,—eyes that darted with rapidity from one object to another.

This gentleman, during almost all the journey thus far, had entered into conversation with no fellow-traveller, as if he carefully avoided all acquaintance. When spoken to, he answered curtly and decisively, and began to look out of the car window obstinately.

Yet it seemed to me that the solitude weighed upon him. He seemed to perceive that I understood this, and when our eyes met, as happened frequently, since we were sitting almost opposite each other, he turned away his head, and avoided conversation with me as much as with the others. At nightfall, during a stop at a large station, the gentleman with the fine baggage—a lawyer, as I have since learned—got out with his companion to drink some tea at the restaurant. During their absence several new travellers entered the car, among whom was a tall old man, shaven and wrinkled, evidently a merchant, wearing a large heavily-lined cloak and a big cap. This merchant sat down opposite the empty seats of the lawyer and his companion, and straightway entered into conversation with a young man who seemed like an employee in some commercial house, and who had likewise just boarded the train. At first the clerk had remarked that the seat opposite was occupied, and the old man had answered that he should get out at the first station. Thus their conversation started.

I was sitting not far from these two travellers, and, as the train was not in motion, I could catch bits of their conversation when others were not talking.

They talked first of the prices of goods and the condition of business; they referred to a person whom they both knew; then they plunged into the fair at Nijni Novgorod. The clerk boasted of knowing people who were leading a gay life there, but the old man did not allow him to continue, and, interrupting him, began to describe the festivities of the previous year at Kounavino, in which he had taken part. He was evidently proud of these recollections, and, probably thinking that this would detract nothing from the gravity which his face and manners expressed, he related with pride how, when drunk, he had fired, at Kounavino, such a broadside that he could describe it only in the other's ear.

The clerk began to laugh noisily. The old man laughed too, showing two long yellow teeth. Their conversation not interesting me, I left the car to stretch my legs. At the door I met the lawyer and his lady.

"You have no more time," the lawyer said to me. "The second bell is about to ring."

Indeed I had scarcely reached the rear of the train when the bell sounded. As I entered the car again, the lawyer was talking with his companion in an animated fashion. The merchant, sitting opposite them, was taciturn.

"And then she squarely declared to her husband," said the lawyer with a smile, as I passed by them, "that she neither could nor would live with him, because" . . .

And he continued, but I did not hear the rest of the sentence, my attention being distracted by the passing of the conductor and a new traveller. When silence was restored, I again heard the lawyer's voice. The conversation had passed from a special case to general considerations.

"And afterward comes discord, financial difficulties, disputes between the two parties, and the couple separate. In the good old days that seldom happened. Is it not so?" asked the lawyer of the two merchants, evidently trying to drag them into the conversation.

Just then the train started, and the old man, without answering, took off his cap, and crossed himself three times while muttering a prayer. When he had finished, he clapped his cap far down on his head, and said:

"Yes, sir, that happened in former times also, but not as often. In the present day it is bound to happen more

frequently. People have become too learned."

The lawyer made some reply to the old man, but the train, ever increasing its speed, made such a clatter upon the rails that I could no longer hear distinctly. As I was interested in what the old man was saying, I drew nearer. My neighbor, the nervous gentleman, was evidently interested also, and, without changing his seat, he lent an ear.

"But what harm is there in education?" asked the lady, with a smile that was scarcely perceptible. "Would it be better to marry as in the old days, when the bride and bridegroom did not even see each other before marriage?" she continued, answering, as is the habit of our ladies, not the words that her interlocutor had spoken, but the words she believed he was going to speak. "Women did not know whether they would love or would be loved, and they were married to the first comer, and suffered all their lives. Then you think it was better so?" she continued, evidently addressing the lawyer and myself, and not at all the old man.

"People have become too learned," repeated the last, looking at the lady with contempt, and leaving her question unanswered.

"I should be curious to know how you explain the correlation between education and conjugal differences," said the lawyer, with a slight smile.

The merchant wanted to make some reply, but the lady interrupted him.

"No, those days are past."

The lawyer cut short her words:—

"Let him express his thought."

"Because there is no more fear," replied the old man.

"But how will you marry people who do not love each other? Only animals can be coupled at the will of a proprietor. But people have inclinations, attachments," the lady hastened to say, casting a glance at the lawyer, at me, and even at the clerk, who, standing up and leaning his elbow on the back of a seat, was listening to the conversation with a smile.

"You are wrong to say that, madam," said the old man. "The animals are beasts, but man has received the law."

"But, nevertheless, how is one to live with a man when there is no love?" said the lady, evidently excited by the general sympathy and attention.

"Formerly no such distinctions were made," said the old man, gravely. "Only now have they become a part of our habits. As soon as the least thing happens, the wife says: 'I release you. I am going to leave your house.' Even among the moujiks this fashion has become acclimated. 'There,' she says, 'here are your shirts and drawers. I am going off with Vanka. His hair is curlier than yours.' Just go talk with them. And yet the first rule for the wife should be fear."

The clerk looked at the lawyer, the lady, and myself, evidently repressing a smile, and all ready to deride or approve the merchant's words, according to the attitude of the others.

"What fear?" said the lady.

"This fear,—the wife must fear her husband; that is what fear."

"Oh, that, my little father, that is ended."

"No, madam, that cannot end. As she, Eve, the woman, was taken from man's ribs, so she will remain unto the end of the world," said the old man, shaking his head so triumphantly and so severely that the clerk, deciding that the victory was on his side, burst into a loud laugh.

"Yes, you men think so," replied the lady, without surrendering, and turning toward us. "You have given yourself liberty. As for woman, you wish to keep her in the seraglio. To you, everything is permissible. Is it not so?"

"Oh, man,—that's another affair."

"Then, according to you, to man everything is permissible?"

"No one gives him this permission; only, if the man behaves badly outside, the family is not increased thereby; but the woman, the wife, is a fragile vessel," continued the merchant, severely.

His tone of authority evidently subjugated his hearers. Even the lady felt crushed, but she did not surrender.

"Yes, but you will admit, I think, that woman is a human being, and has feelings like her husband. What should she

do if she does not love her husband?"

"If she does not love him!" repeated the old man, stormily, and knitting his brows; "why, she will be made to love him."

This unexpected argument pleased the clerk, and he uttered a murmur of approbation.

"Oh, no, she will not be forced," said the lady. "Where there is no love, one cannot be obliged to love in spite of herself."

"And if the wife deceives her husband, what is to be done?" said the lawyer.

"That should not happen," said the old man. "He must have his eyes about him."

"And if it does happen, all the same? You will admit that it does happen?"

"It happens among the upper classes, not among us," answered the old man. "And if any husband is found who is such a fool as not to rule his wife, he will not have robbed her. But no scandal, nevertheless. Love or not, but do not disturb the household. Every husband can govern his wife. He has the necessary power. It is only the imbecile who does not succeed in doing so."

Everybody was silent. The clerk moved, advanced, and, not wishing to lag behind the others in the conversation, began with his eternal smile:

"Yes, in the house of our employer, a scandal has arisen, and it is very difficult to view the matter clearly. The wife loved to amuse herself, and began to go astray. He is a capable and serious man. First, it was with the book-keeper. The husband tried to bring her back to reason through kindness. She did not change her conduct. She plunged into all sorts of beastliness. She began to steal his money. He beat her, but she grew worse and worse. To an unbaptized, to a pagan, to a Jew (saving your permission), she went in succession for her caresses. What could the employer do? He has dropped her entirely, and now he lives as a bachelor. As for her, she is dragging in the depths."

"He is an imbecile," said the old man. "If from the first he had not allowed her to go in her own fashion, and had kept a firm hand upon her, she would be living honestly, no danger. Liberty must be taken away from the beginning. Do not trust yourself to your horse upon the highway. Do not trust yourself to your wife at home."

At that moment the conductor passed, asking for the tickets for the next station. The old man gave up his.

“Yes, the feminine sex must be dominated in season, else all will perish.”

“And you yourselves, at Kounavino, did you not lead a gay life with the pretty girls?” asked the lawyer with a smile.

“Oh, that’s another matter,” said the merchant, severely.

“Good-by,” he added, rising. He wrapped himself in his cloak, lifted his cap, and, taking his bag, left the car.

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Scarcely had the old man gone when a general conversation began.

"There's a little Old Testament father for you," said the clerk.

"He is a Domostroy," [1](#) said the lady. "What savage ideas about a woman and marriage!"

"Yes, gentlemen," said the lawyer, "we are still a long way from the European ideas upon marriage. First, the rights of woman, then free marriage, then divorce, as a question not yet solved." . . .

"The main thing, and the thing which such people as he do not understand," rejoined the lady, "is that only love consecrates marriage, and that the real marriage is that which is consecrated by love."

The clerk listened and smiled, with the air of one accustomed to store in his memory all intelligent conversation that he hears, in order to make use of it afterwards.

"But what is this love that consecrates marriage?" said, suddenly, the voice of the nervous and taciturn gentleman, who, unnoticed by us, had approached.

He was standing with his hand on the seat, and evidently agitated. His face was red, a vein in his forehead was swollen, and the muscles of his cheeks quivered.

"What is this love that consecrates marriage?" he repeated.

"What love?" said the lady. "The ordinary love of husband and wife."

"And how, then, can ordinary love consecrate marriage?" continued the nervous gentleman, still excited, and with a displeased air. He seemed to wish to say something disagreeable to the lady. She felt it, and began to grow agitated.

"How? Why, very simply," said she.

The nervous gentleman seized the word as it left her lips.

"No, not simply."

"Madam says," interceded the lawyer indicating his companion, "that marriage should be first the result of an attachment, of a love, if you will, and that, when love exists, and in that case only, marriage represents something sacred. But every marriage which is not based on a natural attachment, on love, has in it nothing that is morally obligatory. Is not that the idea that you intended to convey?" he asked the lady.

The lady, with a nod of her head, expressed her approval of this translation of her thoughts.

"Then," resumed the lawyer, continuing his remarks.

But the nervous gentleman, evidently scarcely able to contain himself, without allowing the lawyer to finish, asked:

"Yes, sir. But what are we to understand by this love that alone consecrates marriage?"

"Everybody knows what love is," said the lady.

"But I don't know, and I should like to know how you define it."

"How? It is very simple," said the lady.

And she seemed thoughtful, and then said:

"Love . . . love . . . is a preference for one man or one woman to the exclusion of all others. . . ."

"A preference for how long? . . . For a month, two days, or half an hour?" said the nervous gentleman, with special irritation.

"No, permit me, you evidently are not talking of the same thing."

"Yes, I am talking absolutely of the same thing. Of the preference for one man or one woman to the exclusion of all others. But I ask: a preference for how long?"

"For how long? For a long time, for a life-time sometimes."

"But that happens only in novels. In life, never. In life this preference for one to the exclusion of all others lasts in rare cases several years, oftener several months, or even weeks, days, hours. . . ."

"Oh, sir. Oh, no, no, permit me," said all three of us at the same time.

The clerk himself uttered a monosyllable of disapproval.

"Yes, I know," he said, shouting louder than all of us; "you are talking of what is believed to exist, and I am talking of what is. Every man feels what you call love toward each pretty woman he sees, and very little toward his wife. That is the origin of the proverb,—and it is a true one, —'Another's wife is a white swan, and ours is bitter wormwood.'"

"Ah, but what you say is terrible! There certainly exists among human beings this feeling which is called love, and which lasts, not for months and years, but for life."

"No, that does not exist. Even if it should be admitted that Menelaus had preferred Helen all his life, Helen would have preferred Paris; and so it has been, is, and will be eternally. And it cannot be otherwise, just as it cannot happen that, in a load of chick-peas, two peas marked with a special sign should fall side by side. Further, this is not only an improbability, but it is certain that a feeling of satiety will come to Helen or to Menelaus. The whole difference is that to one it comes sooner, to the other later. It is only in stupid novels that it is written that 'they loved each other all their lives.' And none but children can believe it. To talk of loving a man or woman for life is like saying that a candle can burn forever."

"But you are talking of physical love. Do you not admit a love based upon a conformity of ideals, on a spiritual affinity?"

"Why not? But in that case it is not necessary to procreate together (excuse my brutality). The point is that this conformity of ideals is not met among old people, but among young and pretty persons," said he, and he began to laugh disagreeably.

"Yes, I affirm that love, real love, does not consecrate marriage, as we are in the habit of believing, but that, on the contrary, it ruins it."

"Permit me," said the lawyer. "The facts contradict your words. We see that marriage exists, that all humanity—at least the larger portion—lives conjugally, and that many husbands and wives honestly end a long life together."