

CHAPTER II

THE estate of the Verigos was an oasis in the desert. Among the families that they visited, Katya saw very different scenes.

A neighbor and relative of the Verigos was Madame Shiria, a widow with an idiot son. She had the disposal of his immense fortune, and squandered it recklessly. Other relatives tried to have a guardian appointed for him. It was the government's custom to let all matters be decided by the nobility rather than by experts. Instead of having a commission of doctors determine whether the young man was mentally deficient, the authorities decreed that the question should be settled by his acquaintances. Then on every side there were disputes, one person crying, "Fedia is an idiot!" and another protesting, "Fedia is not an idiot!" The line of cleavage was between those who expected to inherit something from Fedia's estate and those who hoped to get a handsome present from Fedia's mother. Madame Shiria hired a young man to personate her son, and placed him in a notary's office as proof that he was quite able to manage his own affairs. Meanwhile she continued to squander his property. She lived like a queen. During a single winter in Berlin she spent two hundred thousand rubles. She was a woman of rare beauty, and captivated the heart of the