

THE SNOW STORM.

Toward the end of 1811, at a memorial period for Russians, lived on his own domain of Nenaradova the kind-hearted Gavril R. He was celebrated in the whole district for his hospitality and his genial character. Neighbors constantly visited him to have something to eat and drink and to play at five co-peck boston with his wife, Praskovia. Some, too, went to have a look at their daughter, Maria, a tall, pale girl of 17. She was an heiress, and they desired her either for themselves or their sons.

Maria had been brought up on French novels, and consequently was in love. The object of her affection was a poor ensign in the army, who was now at home in his small village on a leave of absence. As a matter of course, the young man reciprocated Maria's passion. But the parents of his beloved, noticing their mutual attachment, forbade their daughter to even think of him while they received him worse than an ex-asse judge.

Our lovers corresponded, and met alone daily in the pine wood or by the old roadway chapel. There they vowed everlasting love, inveighed against fate, and exchanged various suggestions. Writing and talking in this way, they quite naturally reached the following conclusion.

If we cannot exist apart from each other, and if the tyranny of hard-hearted parents throws obstacles in the way of our happiness, then can we not manage without them?

Of course this happy idea originated in the mind of the young man, but it pleased immensely the romantic imagination of Maria.

Winter set in and put a stop to their meetings. But their correspondence became all the more active. Vladimir begged Maria in every letter to give herself up to him that they might get married secretly, hide for a while, and then throw themselves at the feet of their parents, who would, of course, in the end be touched by their heroic constancy and say to them, "Children, come to our arms!"

Maria hesitated a long while, and out of many different plans proposed that of flight was for a time rejected. At last, however, she consented. On the appointed day she was to decline supper and retire to her room under the plea of a headache. She and her maid, who was in the secret, were then to go out into the garden by the back stairs, and behind the garden they would find a sledge ready for them, would get into it and drive a distance of five miles from Nenaradova to the village of Jadrino, straight to the church, where Vladimir would be waiting for them.

On the eve of the decisive day Maria did not sleep all night; she was packing and tying up linen dresses. She wrote, moreover, a long letter to a friend of hers, a sentimental young lady, and another to her parents. Of the latter she took leave in the most touching terms. She excused the step she was taking by reason of the unconquerable power of love, and wound up by declaring that she should consider it the happiest moment of her life when she was allowed to throw herself at the feet of her dearest parents. Sealing both letters with a Toulouseal on which were engraved two flaming hearts with an appropriate inscription, she at last threw herself upon her bed before daybreak, and dozed off, though even then she was awakened from one moment to another by terrible thoughts. First it seemed to her that at the moment of entering the sledge in order to go and get married, her father stopped her, and with cruel rapidity dragged her over the snow, and threw her into a dark, bottomless cellar—down which she fell headlong with an indescribable sinking of the heart. Then she saw Vladimir lying on the grass, pale and bleeding, with his dying breath he implored her to make haste and marry him. Other hideous and senseless visions floated before her one after another. Finally she rose paler than usual and with a real headache.

Both her father and her mother remarked her indisposition. Their tender anxiety and constant inquiries, "What is the matter with you, Masha—are you ill?" cut her to the heart. She tried to pacify them and to appear cheerful, but she could not. Evening set in. The idea that she was passing the last day in the midst of her family oppressed her. In her secret heart she took leave of everybody, of everything which surrounded her.

Supper was served; her heart beat violently. In a trembling voice she declared that she did not want any supper, and wished her father and mother good night. They kissed her and as usual blessed her.

Reaching her own room, she threw her-

self into an easy chair and burst into tears. Her maid begged her to be calm and take courage. Everything was ready. In half an hour Masha would leave forever her parents' home, and her own home, her peaceful life as a young girl.

Out of doors the snow was falling, the wind howling. The shutters rattled and shook. In everything she seemed to recognize omens, and threats.

Soon the whole house was quiet and asleep. Masha wrapped herself in a shawl, put on a warm cloak, and with a box in her hand passed out on to the back staircase. The maid carried two bundles after her. They descended into the garden. The snowstorm raged; a strong wind blew against them, as if trying to stop the young culprit. With difficulty they reached the end of the garden. In the road a sledge awaited them.

The horses, from cold, would not stand still. Vladimir's coachman was walking to and fro in front of them, trying to quiet them. He helped the young lady and her maid to their seats, and packing away the bundles and dressing-case, took up the reins, and the horses flew forward into the darkness of the night.

Having entrusted the young lady to the care of fate and of Tereshka, the coachman, let us return to the young lover.

Vladimir had spent the whole day in driving. In the morning he had called on the Jadrino priest, and with difficulty came to terms with him. Then he went to seek the witnesses from among the neighboring gentry. The first on whom he called was a former cornet of horse, Dravin by name, a man in his forties, who consented at once. The adventure he declared, reminded him of old times and of his larks when in the Hussars. He persuaded Vladimir to stop to dinner with him, assuring him that there would be no difficulty in getting the other two witnesses. Indeed, immediately after dinner in came the surveyor, Schmidt, with a mustache and spurs, and the son of a captain-magistrate, a boy of 16 who had recently entered the Uhlans. They not only accepted Vladimir's proposal, but even swore they were ready to sacrifice their lives for him. Vladimir embraced them with delight, and drove off to get everything ready.

It had long been dark. Vladimir dispatched his trustworthy Tereshka to Nenaradova with his two-horse sledge, and with appropriate instructions for the occasion. For himself he ordered the small sledge with one horse and started alone without a coachman for Jadrino, where Maria ought to arrive in a couple of hours. He knew the road, and the drive would only occupy 20 minutes.

But Vladimir had scarcely passed from the enclosure into the open field when the wind rose, and soon there was a driving snowstorm so heavy and so severe that he could not see. In a moment the road was covered with snow. All landmarks disappeared in the murky yellow darkness, through which fell white flakes of snow. Sky and earth became merged into one. Vladimir, in the midst of the field, tried in vain to get to the road. The horse walked on at random, and every moment stepped either into deep snow or into a rut, so that the sledge was constantly upsetting. Vladimir, tried at least not to lose the right direction, but it seemed to him that more than half an hour had passed, and he had not yet reached the Jadrino wood. Another 10 minutes passed, and still the wood was invisible. Vladimir drove across fields intersected by deep ditches. The snowstorm did not abate, and the sky did not clear. The horse was getting tired, and the perspiration rolled from him like hail, in spite of the fact that every moment his legs were disappearing in the snow.

At last Vladimir found that he was going in the wrong direction. He stopped; began to reflect, recollect and consider; till at last he became convinced that he ought to have turned to the right. He did so now. His horse could scarcely drag along. But he had been more than an hour on the road, and Jadrino could not now be far. He drove and drove, but there was no getting out of the field. Still snowdrifts and ditches. Every moment the sledge was upset, and every moment Vladimir had to raise it up.

Time was slipping by, and Vladimir grew seriously anxious. At last in the distance some dark object could be seen.

Vladimir turned in its direction, and as he drew near found it was a wood.

"Thank heaven!" he thought, "I am now near the end."

He drove by the side of the wood, hoping to come at once upon the familiar road, or, if not, to pass round the wood. Jadrino was situated immediately behind it.

He soon found the road, and passed into the darkness of the wood, now stripped by the winter. The wind could not rage here; the road was smooth, the horse picked up courage and Vladimir was comforted.

He drove and drove, but still Jadrino was not to be seen; there was no end to the wood. Then, to his horror, he discovered that he had got into a strange wood. He was in despair. He whipped his horse, and the poor animal started off on a trot. But it soon got tired, and in a quarter of an hour, in spite of all poor Vladimir's efforts, could only crawl.

Gradually the trees became thinner, and Vladimir drove out of the wood, but Jadrino was not to be seen. It must have been about midnight. Tears gushed from the young man's eyes. He drove on at random, and now the weather had abated, the clouds dispersed, and before him was a wide stretch of a plain, covered with a white billowy carpet. The night was comparatively clear, and he could see a small village a short distance off, which consisted of four or five cottages. Vladimir drove toward it. At the first door he jumped out of the sledge, ran up to the window, and tapped.

After a few minutes a wooden shutter was raised and an old man stuck out his gray beard.

"What do you want?"

"How far is Jadrino?"

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"Yes, yes. Is it far?"

"Not far; about 10 miles."

At this answer Vladimir clutched hold of his hair and stood motionless, like a man condemned to death.

"Where do you come from?" added the man. Vladimir had not the courage to reply.

"My man," he said, "can you procure me horses to Jadrino?"

"We have no horses," answered the peasant.

"Could I find a guide. I will pay him any sum he likes."

"Stop," said the old man, dropping the shutter; "I will send my son out to you; he will conduct you."

Vladimir waited. Scarcely a minute had passed when he again knocked. The shutter was lifted and a beard was seen.

"What do you want?"

"What about your son?"

"He'll come out directly; he is putting on his boots. Are you cold? Come in and warm yourself."

"Thanks; send out your son quickly."

The gate creaked, a youth came out with a cudgel, and walked on in front, at one time pointing out the road, at another looking for it in a mass of drifted snow.

"What o'clock is it?" Vladimir asked him.

"It will soon be daylight," replied the young peasant. Vladimir spoke not another word.

The cocks were crowing and it was light when they reached Jadrino. The church was closed. Vladimir paid the guide, and drove into the yard of the priest's house. In the yard his two-horse sledge was not to be seen. What news awaited him!

But let us return to the kind proprietors of Nenaradova, and see what is going on there.

Nothing.

The old people awoke, and went into the sitting-room, Gavril in a nightcap and flannel jacket, Praskovia in a wadded dressing gown. The samovar was brought in, and Gavril sent the little maid to ask Maria how she was and how she had slept. The little maid returned, saying that her young lady had slept badly, but that she was better now, and that she would come into the sitting-room in a moment. And indeed the door opened and Maria came in and wished her papa and mama good-morning.

"How is your headache, Masha?" (familiar for Mary), inquired Gavril.

"Better, papa," answered Masha.

"The fumes from the stove must have given you your headache," remarked Praskovia.

"Perhaps so, mamma," replied Masha.

The day passed well enough, but in the night Masha was taken ill. A doctor was sent for from town. He came toward evening and found the patient delirious. Soon she was in a severe fever, and in a fortnight the poor victim was on the brink of the grave.

No member of the family knew anything of the flight from home. The letters written by Masha the evening before had been burnt, and the maid fearing the wrath of her master and mistress, had not breathed a word. The priest, the ex-cornet, the big mustached surveyor, and the little lancer were equally discreet, and with good reason. Tereshka, the coachman, never said

too much, not even in his drink. Thus the secret was kept better than it might have been by a half a dozen conspirators.

But Maria, herself in the course of her long fever, let out her secret. Nevertheless, her words were so disconnected that her mother, who never left her bedside, could only make out from them that her daughter was desperately in love with Vladimir, and that probably love was the cause of her illness. She consulted her husband and some of her neighbors, and at last it was decided unanimously that the fate of Maria ought not to be interfered with, that a woman must not ride away from the man she is destined to marry, that poverty is no crime, that a woman has to live not with money but with a man, and so on. Moral proverbs are wonderfully useful on such occasions, when we can invent little or nothing in our own justification.

Meanwhile the young lady began to recover. Vladimir had not been seen for a long time in the house of Gavril, so frightened had he been by his previous reception. It was now resolved to send and announce to him the good news which he could scarcely expect, the consent of her parents to his marriage with Maria.

But what was the astonishment of the proprietors of Nenaradova when in answer to their invitation they received an insane reply. Vladimir informed them he could never set foot in their house, and begged them to forget an unhappy man whose only hope now was in death. A few days afterward they heard that Vladimir had left the place and joined the army.

A long time passed before they ventured to tell Masha, who was now recovering. She never mentioned Vladimir. Some months later, however, finding his name in the list of those who distinguished themselves and been severely wounded at Borodino, she fainted, and it was feared that the fever might return. But, heaven be thanked! the fainting fit had no bad results.

Maria experienced yet another sorrow. Her father died, leaving her the heiress of all his property. But the inheritance could not console her. She shared sincerely the affliction of her mother, and vowed she would never leave her.

Suitors clustered round the charming heiress; but she gave no one the slightest hope. Her mother sometimes tried to persuade her to choose a companion in life; but Masha shook her head and grew pensive.

Vladimir no longer existed. He had died at Moscow on the eve of the arrival of the French. His memory was held sacred by Maria, and she treasured up everything that would remind her of him; books he had read, drawings which he had done, and the pieces of poetry which he had copied out for her.

The neighbors, hearing all this, wondered at her fidelity, and waited with curiosity the arrival of the hero who must in the end triumph over the melancholy constancy of this virgin Artemis.

Meanwhile, the war had been brought to a glorious conclusion, and our armies were returning from abroad. The people ran to meet them. The music played by the regimental bands consisted of war songs, "Vive Henri-Quatre," Tyrolese waltzes and airs from Joconde. Nourished on the atmosphere of winter, officers who had started on the campaign mere striplings returned grown men and covered with decorations. The soldiers conversed gaily among themselves, mingling German and French words every moment in their speech. A time never to be forgotten—a time of glory and delight! How quickly beat the Russian heart at the words, "Native land!" How sweet the tears of meeting! With what unanimity did we combine feelings of national pride with love for the Tsar! And for him, what a moment!

The women—our Russian women—were splendid then. Their usual coldness disappeared. Their delight was really intoxicating when, meeting the conquerors, they cried "Hurrah!" And they threw up their caps in the air.

Who of the officers of that period does not own that to the Russian woman he was indebted for his best and most valued reward? During this brilliant period Maria was living with her mother in retirement, and neither of them saw how in both capitals, the returning troops were welcomed. But in the districts and villages the general enthusiasm was, perhaps, even greater.

In these places the appearance of an officer became for him a veritable triumph. The accepted lover in plain clothes fared badly by his side.

We have already said that, in spite of her coldness, Maria was still, as before surrounded by suitors. But all had to fall in the rear when there arrived at his castle the wounded young captain of Hussars—Bour-