

THE MOTHER OF IVAN TOURGUÉNEFF.



IT was Mr. Howells who, in 1871, called my attention to the writings of Tourguéneff. In 1872 we read "Smoke" together, and agreed that it was a great book. I then procured the whole series of Tourguéneff's novels in French and German translations, and the mingled strangeness and familiarity of the life they depicted attracted me with a potent fascination. Something marvelously new dawned upon me in these strong and simple tales, and I did not quite know what it was until it had, by some curious alchemy, entered into the substance of my mind, and changed my vision of the world. I had until then contemplated life through the medium of literature; now I learned to view literature through the medium of life—judge it according to the degree of its veracity. I do not mean by veracity a mere external conformity to fact, but a fundamental truth of conception and adherence to the logic of life. What impressed me so tremendously in Tourguéneff's novels was their accent of truth, their convincing authenticity. The incidents, though they be ever so fictitious, have the ring of things seen, heard, and experienced. The very subtlest flavor of personality which hitherto had eluded expression he triumphantly captured, and that often in nobly simple phrases. What writer is there who has not been visited with despair at the inexpressibility of the finest things which his inner sense apprehended? But here was one who had actually enlarged the territory of expression; who, with the comparatively coarse instrument of a semi-barbarous language, had surpassed the achievements of the most finished workman using the most exquisite tools. The fancies which, for others, broke through language and escaped he arrested in their flight, and held imprisoned within the meshes of his beautiful phrases.

This only to account for the enthusiasm which possessed me during the winter of 1873-74, when I met Tourguéneff in Paris. I have told elsewhere¹ of our intercourse during those delightful months. Suffice it to say that I found him a large and genial man, of quiet manners, naturally dignified, and full of gentleness and urbanity. His eyes were wonderfully kind, and kindness, I should say, was the key-note of his nature. His conversation was like his books, calm and natural, without a hint of the overstrained smartness of the boulevards, but opening vistas of reflection by its inspiring suggestions. There lay behind his remarks, in spite of their simplicity, a world of thought and ob-

¹ "The Galaxy," April, 1874.

ervation—and as I sometimes fancied, of passionate, nay, even tragic, experience. It happened twice during our familiar talks in his library that he afforded me, inadvertently as it were, a glimpse of some somber and soul-stirring episode in his life of which he seemed in his next moment anxious to obliterate the impression. It was as if by the momentary opening of a door a murmur of turbulent music had reached me, and then, before I could catch its strain, it was gone.

He was subject at times to the most terrible fits of depression, when he would bewail his cowardice and the uselessness of his existence. When these attacks came upon him, he would sit and gaze before him with curiously veiled, unobservant eyes; but if, fancying that my presence was not desired, I rose to take my leave, he would rouse himself, and earnestly request me to remain. It was not until he was dead that I was able to assign a cause for these morbid moods of an otherwise sane and robust temperament. They were obviously the first symptoms of the spinal disease which ended his life in 1882. His reason was clouded during the year preceding his death; and a most pathetic portrait of him, exhibiting the signs of mental decay, was published in THE CENTURY MAGAZINE for November, 1883.

As to the tragic experience to which I have referred, some information is supplied (and much also withheld) by a book recently published by Michel Delines under the title "Tourguéneff Inconnu." The contributions of M. Delines himself are not remarkable; for nearly every one of Tourguéneff's friends could match the anecdotes which he relates of the great author's generosity in money matters, and his readiness to be victimized by Russian impostors who posed as patriotic martyrs. But the sketch of his mother, written by his adopted sister, accounts for much in Tourguéneff's character, and is of surpassing interest. When I read it the words of my friend recurred to my memory: "My mother was the typical noble lady of Russia"; and this was the only thing he ever said about her except this: "The utter irresponsibility of the master in his intercourse with the serf has the most detrimental effect upon character—as I saw exemplified in the case of my own mother."

I concluded from this that his mother had been a hard and tyrannical woman, and that he was unable to cherish her memory. But never did I dream, until his sister's narration fell into my hands, that she was the female counterpart of Ivan the Terrible. She delighted in the most arbitrary exercise of power, and

from sheer ennui tormented every one who came within the reach of her authority. She had herself been cruelly maltreated in her childhood — nay, she had been direfully insulted by her stepfather, and compelled in consequence to flee from home and seek refuge with a relative. By the death of her uncle, Ivan Lou-tovinoff, she inherited an immense fortune, on the receipt of which she characteristically remarked, "Now I can do anything I like" ("Maintenant, je peux tout"). Among the many suitors who competed for her favor, she chose for a husband Sergius Nicolaevitch Tourguéneff because of his extraordinary beauty. She established herself in princely opulence on her estate of Spasskoë, and as she was determined upon keeping the reins of authority in her own hands, her husband thought it wiser to indulge her caprices, and refrain, as far as possible, from interfering with her wishes. Probably he had by this time discovered with whom he had to deal. He was too prudent a man to provoke a quarrel with a woman of so formidable a temperament.

It was, in fact, not only he whom she governed, but she insisted upon regulating the affairs of every one who approached her, or entered into any sort of relation with her, however remote. Her autocratic will did not tolerate even a suspicion of criticism, far less opposition; and the devices she hit upon for humiliating those who manifested what she regarded as a spirit of insubordination were worthy of her imperial prototype Catherine, misnamed the Great. When her daughter was ill with typhoid fever, she gave the physician, who was a highly educated serf, the choice between a complete cure and Siberia. A favorite serf, whom it pleased her from sheer caprice to persecute, she degraded from the position of a waiter to that of a field-laborer, and made him exchange his fine livery for the coarse garb of a peasant. Her major-domo, Paliakoff, she assaulted, in a fit of uncontrollable fury, with a crutch, and would have killed him if her brother-in-law had not interfered. She separated him from his wife and children, to whom he was warmly devoted, and exercised a diabolical ingenuity in devising new tortures for the unhappy man. His offense was that he had, out of love for his young master, Nicholas Tourguéneff, deceived her regarding the latter's relation to a certain beautiful German governess with whom Nicholas was deeply in love, and whom he had secretly married.

Neither Church nor State was of the least consequence if it came into conflict with Madame Tourguéneff's domineering will. She took into her head once to go to confession, and ordered the priest to attend her at a certain hour in her private chapel. All her numerous household were called in to partake of the sacrament.

When their mistress knelt to begin her confession, the priest made a signal to all present to depart. But Madame Tourguéneff promptly countermanded the order.

"Stay!" she cried.

A great confusion arose, some staying and others struggling to get out.

"It is contrary to the rules of the Church to hear confession in the presence of any one but the priest," her confessor observed mildly.

"But I—I wish to confess before all the world," replied the lady.

"But that is forbidden."

"But I—I say—that it is permitted," followed in a voice like a thunderclap; whereupon, snatching the prayer-book out of the hands of the priest, she began in a loud voice to recite the prescribed prayers.

When she had finished, the priest not daring to interfere, she turned toward her servants and said, "Pardon me"; and then in a tone of command to the priest, "Now administer the holy sacrament."

On another occasion she feigned illness, and gathered her household (consisting of forty house-servants, not counting the boy pages and an army of field-laborers) about her alleged death-bed, in order to test their sentiments toward her. All except two, who were a trifle tipsy, manifested the most exaggerated grief. In a dying voice she took an affecting leave of her children, all the time surreptitiously watching the countenance of each, in order to detect any hidden satisfaction or possible symptom of simulation. When she had finished her observation, she turned to her daughter and said, "Stop crying! God is merciful. Perhaps he will let me live. I feel better. Agatha! A cup of tea."

Then recovering with miraculous swiftness her wonted tone and manner, she commanded the major-domo to write down, according to her dictation, the punishment to be inflicted upon those abandoned wretches whose grief had not come up to her requirements.

When presently the church bells began to chime (it being the beginning of Holy Week), she sent word to the priest, forbidding the ringing, and the whole Easter festival, with its appropriate dishes and ceremonies, was for that year abolished, as far as Spasskoë with its dependencies was concerned.

One may well imagine what kind of boyhood Ivan Tourguéneff must have spent with such a mother. Without ever inquiring into his alleged misdemeanors, she did not disdain to whip him almost daily with her own hands. If, as frequently happened, he did not know why he was being punished, and took the liberty to ask, she responded only with more blows. And after having performed this pious labor, she would, as likely as not, order her daughter to

read aloud to her a chapter of Thomas à Kempis's "Imitation of Christ."

When the boy, humiliated, tormented, and harassed beyond endurance, made preparations for flight, which were only by accident discovered, she was frightened, and treated him henceforth with a greater approach to forbearance. As regards the father, he was too prudent by any kind of interference to expose himself to the wrath of his tempestuous spouse. He held aloof from all domestic scenes with the air of a well-bred stranger, who feigns not to observe what might be embarrassing to the family, if reported. His sole attention to his sons was to reach them his hand to kiss when they came to bid him good-night; and on the above recorded occasion, when Ivan's flight had been prevented, he managed to shake off his indifference so far as to remark in French:

"You are pretty, my little one. So young, and yet you can do such villainous things."

Who can wonder that these years of sorrow produced a sorrowful harvest? Ivan Tourguéneff was not by nature inclined to melancholy, but the continual unmerited sufferings of his boyhood gave a warp to his character from which it never could recover. His father's early death made but a slight impression upon him, while his mother's unimpaired vigor of health and temper was and remained the most formidable fact of his existence. He made repeated efforts to soothe and soften her, but only with momentary effect. The savage strain in her blood reasserted itself promptly, impelling her to acts of violence and treachery. The reflection which urges itself upon the reader of this tragic narrative is the appalling power of one cruel nature to spread misery and ruin—to blot out the very sun in the heavens, and to steep in darkness every life which comes within the sphere of its influence.

Having failed to break up the marriage of her elder son, and having cursed his three children, and ground their pictures under her heels (whereupon, strange to say, they all died), Madame Tourguéneff was the more resolved that the younger should make a fitting alliance and be a credit to her family. Imagine, then, her horror when she found that he wrote books—that his highest ambition was to be an author, like Pushkin!

"Is that a business for a nobleman?" she cried contemptuously. . . . "I can understand that you might write verses. But to be an author—an author! Do you know what it means to be an author? I'll tell you. Author and quill-driver are one and the same thing. Both sling ink for money. A nobleman should serve the czar, make a career and a name for himself in the army, and not by slinging ink. And who reads a Russian book, anyway? In-

deed, Ivan, believe me, in the army you would soon be promoted . . . and then you can marry . . ."

"Marry, mother!" replied her son, "Never! Pray, don't think of it. Sooner will the church of Spasskoë dance a jig on its two crosses than I will marry."

At this sally his sister began to laugh.

"How dare you laugh at such stupidities?" ejaculated the irate lady. "And you, Ivan, what nonsense you talk in the presence of this child!"

"But, mother," he remonstrated calmly, "why do *you* speak so contemptuously of authors? You were perfectly wild about Pushkin. And then Joukovsky—you both loved and respected him."

"Joukovsky! Well, that is quite another matter. You forget that he was received at court."

Her only criticism on Gogol, the author of "Dead Souls," whom her son passionately admired, was that he was improper and "bad form."

But when she heard that Ivan's books, which she herself professed to despise, had been publicly criticized in the press (a fact which to their author was very gratifying), she flew into one of her tremendous rages, which ended, as usual, with a physician and anodynes.

"How," she thundered, "do they dare criticize *you*—a nobleman and a Tourguéneff?"

"But, mother," he explained, with imperturbable good temper, "that only proves that I have attracted attention—that I am not a nonentity of whom nobody speaks."

"But how—how is it you attract attention? They find fault with you. They treat you as an imbecile, and you are satisfied. What is the good of my having kept teachers and professors for you? One of my sons leaves me for a woman, and the other, my Benjamin, in order to become an author."

Then tears, passionate reproaches, paroxysms of wrath, and hasty summons of the family doctor.

In spite of all threats and opposition, however, Tourguéneff continued to write, and rapidly gained a reputation, to the great chagrin of his mother. But in the mean while an incident occurred which reveals their relation in the most glaring light. Ivan had never neglected an opportunity to speak in behalf of his brother Nicholas, and to urge upon his mother her duty to make some provision for her eldest son, who was living in St. Petersburg in positive penury. He had himself shared his scanty earnings with Nicholas and his family; but being by his "disobedience" cut off from home supplies, he had but little to share. Madame Tourguéneff had conceived the plan of starving her sons into submission; and she seemed to herself a terribly abused

creature when this Spartan discipline proved unavailing. Though she was herself rolling in wealth, and maintaining a small court at Spasskoë, she permitted them to taste the bitterest dregs of poverty, because she could not endure their independence. She was so accustomed to having every one bend under her despotic sway that she could not help attributing a wanton desire to insult her to any one who had the courage to resist. This was the situation when Ivan, after many rebuffs, made a final effort in his brother's behalf to bring her to reason. This time she actually yielded to his importunities, and promised to make a proper provision for both. The next day she dictated to her secretary two curious documents, giving to her two sons her estates Titchévo and Kadnoë. But there was no approach to legal form, no signature of witnesses, or adherence to established usage. She summoned Nicholas and Ivan, and had these deeds of gift read to them.

"Are you not now satisfied with me?" she asked.

After an awkward silence Ivan replied: "Undoubtedly, mother, we should be very well satisfied, and very grateful, if you would have these papers legalized."

"Why legalize?"

"You ask me why. You know perfectly well, if you really desire to deed these estates to us, how it is to be done."

"I don't understand you, Ivan. What more is there to be done? I give to each of you an estate. . . . I do not understand you."

She always assumed this air of innocence when she was checkmated. But the brothers had just received a piece of information which proved that she not only understood, but with her usual imperious irresponsibility was playing a cruel game with them. They had learned from her secretary that she had that same morning written to the stewards of the two estates commanding them immediately to sell all the grain which they had on hand, no matter at what price, and also the unharvested crops, and to send her the money without delay. There would accordingly be no seed-corn for the following year, and no money wherewith to buy, or to support existence in the mean while. The sons, knowing remonstrance to be vain, took their leave ceremoniously, without uttering a word.

The next morning they were again sent for. Ignoring the scene of the previous day, Madame Tourguéneff, sitting in solemn state, presented the sealed packages containing the worthless deeds of gift to Nicholas and Ivan, whereupon she reached them her hands to kiss. Of course they made no attempt to take possession of Titchévo and Kadnoë; and their mother, who dimly perceived that they had lost the last

remnant of respect which they had entertained for her, was bitterly disappointed. For in this extraordinary way she had perhaps intended to improve their circumstances; but then the reflection had occurred to her that if they were rich they would soon emancipate themselves from her control; and this idea seemed insupportable. She had, therefore, devised a clumsy method of keeping them in perpetual subjection by reserving to herself the right of depriving them of their property if they still persevered in displeasing her.

Terrible scenes followed, and the most strained relations existed between mother and sons. Neither she nor they relented, though they outwardly maintained toward her the most deferential attitude, and never by her blasts of passion were betrayed into uttering a discourteous word; they only avoided her, and never voluntarily crossed her path.

Her constant occupation in her declining years was playing at *solitaire*. Though she was suffering from dropsy, and consulted the most famous physicians, she blandly disregarded their dietetic rules, and followed her own sovereign whim. For a long time she ate nothing but grapes, and finally her diet consisted solely of ice-cream. For entertainment her daughter read aloud to her the latest French novels. Before her death, on November 16, 1850, she sent for her sons, who both hastened to her bedside. But only Nicholas found his mother alive. When Ivan arrived she had already expired. Before drawing her last breath, she scrawled these lines on a piece of paper:

"My mother, my children, forgive me! And thou, Lord, forgive me, too; for pride—that mortal sin—was always my cardinal sin."

Ivan Tourguéneff was thirty-two years old when his mother's sinister presence was removed from his life. He was now rich, famous, and universally courted. But from the somber shadow which her formidable Muscovite form threw over his youth he never fully emerged. All his relations (except to his brother and a few friends) were more or less abnormal. His childhood's experience had implanted in him a dread of marriage as the greatest of calamities which could befall a man. But of the two liaisons which he contracted neither brought him happiness. All the satisfaction which life yielded him he found in the companionship of artists and in the practice of his art. I once heard him quote with deep conviction Goethe's saying, "Fortunate is the man who learns in his youth what art is, for he can never be completely unhappy."

But how differently the course of this great man's life would have run if he had had a good mother and a joyous youth!