



ENGRAVED BY R. G. TIETZE, AFTER A RUSSIAN PRINT FROM A PHOTOGRAPH.

NOTABLE WOMEN: SONYA KOVALEVSKY.



ONE of the most popular and typical ideas of woman's place in the world in the days of chivalry is that furnished by the old ballads, which represent her as sitting serenely enthroned above the lists where

mailed champions fought her battles. Nowadays women do not throw down the glove for devoted knights to rescue. They leap boldly into the lists themselves, and wage gallant battle, in company with the warriors, over many serious things, spiritual as well as material, but over none more hotly than over the question of woman's true sphere, and whether the higher education renders a woman unfeminine and unfits her for that sphere.

It will be interesting to watch the hand-to-hand conflict which is certain to ensue upon a fuller knowledge on the part of the public of the career and private life of Sophia (or Sonya) Kovalevsky, set forth in her "Recollections of Childhood" and the biography by the Duchessa di Cajanello. It may safely be predicted that

neither side will conquer, but that each side will always believe that it has demonstrated its doctrines beyond the possibility of doubt.

Only a strong and deeply interesting personality could worthily give rise to such a conflict, and such a personality Sonya Kovalevsky presented. She had no morbid self-consciousness, no precocious sense of her own importance to the universe, present and future, which could inspire her to keep a diary from the age of twelve, such as that of Marie Bashkirtseff, hitherto the best-known of her countrywomen so far as the revelation of inner life is concerned. Sonya Kovalevsky's "Recollections" were not written until she had attained to a position absolutely unique in the history of feminine achievement, and far above that which Marie Bashkirtseff ever dreamed of gaining. She was the professor of mathematics in the University of Stockholm; she had won, in a perfectly fair, sealed competition with the most distinguished men, the greatest mathematical prize in the world — the Bordin prize, which was doubled in amount on her behalf; she had won the hearts of the Swedes, who called her

proudly and affectionately by her pet name — “our Professor Sonya.” Despite her learning, she carried off more prizes of men’s hearts than ambitious Marie Bashkirtseff, with her beauty, taste, aspirations for fashion, society, and a grand match, or, failing that, love.

The comparison of these two Russian women seems only natural, because their likenesses as well as their differences are equally illustrative of particular features in national and individual character, and in the character of all women. In one point they were, in a measure, alike: both Sonya Kovalevsky and Marie Bashkirtseff craved distinction in their work, and yet neither was willing to abdicate the woman’s throne in the affections of men. At the bottom of their hearts the women who have won fame, and for any reason, no matter what, have missed the woman’s distinctive domestic career, always regret that loss. While many of them might hesitate or refuse, like Sonya Kovalevsky, to renounce a brilliant independent career already assured for the problematic happiness of married life, like her they desire to grasp the one without sacrificing the other. This is likewise true of the married women who are “condemned” to the “obscure” life of domestic happiness.

But there was, nevertheless, an essential difference between Sonya Kovalevsky and Marie Bashkirtseff: “our Professor Sonya” loved her work for itself. The fame which it incidentally brought her never spoiled the sweet and gentle ways which endeared her to all. But who dare say that Marie Bashkirtseff loved her work for anything except the world-wide fame which she fondly hoped that it might bring her, or that she was an unselfish, easy, and pleasant person to live with?

Up to the age of fifteen there would seem to have been very little in Sonya Kovalevsky even to suggest her future distinction. From a very early age she was brought up at Palibino, the estate of her father, General Korvin-Krukovsky. This estate was situated on the border of Poland, in the depths of the country, one hundred miles from the nearest railway-station. Her only companions were a beautiful and talented sister, five years her elder, and a brother, three years her junior. She was relegated almost entirely to the society of her governess, who was now a Frenchwoman, now an Englishwoman, and to that of the Polish tutor who grounded her in arithmetic. There were no young people in the neighborhood, and Sonya longed for a companion of her own age; but when one little friend, Olya, was brought to spend the day with her, she bit Olya’s fat little arm until it bled, out of pure jealousy, because Uncle Schubert had taken the newcomer on his lap. After this proof of

her early craving for exclusive affection, which she narrates in her “Recollections,” she seems to have had no playmates.

The Polish tutor relates of little Sonya that, although she was distinguished by rare understanding and facility for learning, she showed no special talent for mathematics until she reached a certain problem in geometry. She cried over that, like an ordinary child, when he told her that she had reached the proper solution by a circuitous, but original, route.

In some of its features the picture which Sonya gives of life on her father’s estate is characteristically national and delightful. In repapering the house, the wall-paper gave out before one of the children’s rooms was reached, and Russian indolence thinking it “not worth the while” to send to St. Petersburg for paper for one room, it was papered with the discarded sheets of lithographed lectures on the differential and integral calculus. The formulæ on these eccentric walls fascinated little Sonya into hours of contemplation, and of effort to piece them together in their proper order. When, at the age of fifteen, she took her first lesson, in St. Petersburg, from a celebrated mathematician, all these formulæ came back to her memory, and she seemed, to the professor’s amazement, to know all these difficult things already.

While little Sonya was thus laying the foundations of her future fame by industry, her elder sister, Aniuta, was behaving very much as any other girl would have done under the circumstances. Aniuta, who was very beautiful, talented, and gifted with a special charm of manner, had been trained to shine in society. Suddenly, just as the age arrived for her rising as a social star, she was carried off to the dullness of life in distant Palibino. Revolt was useless, as repeated attempts proved. Aniuta kept the household in a turmoil with her frantic projects for killing time. Then she took to novel-reading, plunged into medievalism, clothed herself like the lady of an ancient castle, and surrounded herself with antique furniture to preserve the illusion. When this amusement palled, she had a fit of religious enthusiasm, or rather of mysticism, and wept despairingly because she could not fathom the mysteries of creation and of the future life.

From this she was rescued by the arrival, on his vacation, of the village priest’s son. This young man had imbibed “advanced” ideas by contact with the broader life of the capital, and had refused to become a priest and succeed to his father’s place, as is customary. A long explanation would not present the relations which exist between the nobility and the priestly class in Russia as clearly as Sonya

Kovalevsky does with a few graphic touches at this point in her narrative. Since extremes proverbially meet, Aniuta Krukovsky was quite ready to receive "advanced" ideas, because she had seen so little of life, and the priest's son, who had seen too much, gladly instructed her until his father's curse, and ejection from the paternal roof, separated him from his pupil. The first fruit of this instruction was that Aniuta subscribed for Russian periodicals, which her father, who took only French and English journals, despised; and thus she became acquainted with modern Russian authors. The next was that she wrote a story, and sent it to the author-editor Dostoevsky. The latter praised it, accepted it, encouraged her to write more, and paid her for this story, and for a second tale, to which one of his own, written much later, bore a very strong resemblance. Up to this point Aniuta, who knew only too well her father's prejudices, had conducted the affair clandestinely. But the letter with the money fell into her father's hands, and the scene which ensued was characteristic of Russian aristocratic ideas and manners. After a while the father relented, and the family began to regard Aniuta as a genius; and when Mme. Krukovsky, with Aniuta and Sonya, went to St. Petersburg in the following winter, Aniuta carried with her the father's permission to make Dostoevsky's personal acquaintance, under the strictest surveillance of her mother. Authors were a strange and dangerous sort of creatures in the eyes of General Krukovsky and, as a rule, of his class.

Sonya, who was her sister's most ardent admirer, confidante, and companion, witnessed all of this interesting friendship, even the concluding chapter. After Dostoevsky had ruined one of Aniuta's chances of making a desirable marriage by his rude attentions, he proposed to Aniuta himself. On the frail foundation of a bit of egregious flattery, he had become the temporary object of Sonya's fervent adoration, and she practised long and diligently on a piece of music which he liked. When poor Sonya seized her opportunity to entrance him with "his piece," he slipped out of the room, taking Aniuta with him, to offer her his heart. Sonya, having never suspected that Dostoevsky was in love with her sister, found them taking base advantage of her, as she regarded it, and fled to her room and went to bed in a fit of raging jealousy.

Soon afterward the Krukovskys returned to Palibino, and six months later Dostoevsky wrote to tell Aniuta that his forever-shattered heart had been accepted by another girl.

When Sonya was eighteen and Aniuta was twenty-three, the first crisis in Sonya's life arrived. They were again in St. Petersburg. All their intimate friends were imbued with the

"advanced" ideas, and longed for more knowledge, in order that they might, in some undefined manner, serve their beloved country. But parents in the higher ranks of life would not allow their daughters to go abroad to the foreign universities to study, and the higher courses of instruction for women connected with the universities of St. Petersburg and Moscow, were not yet established. In this difficulty the young girls had recourse to the famous "fictitious marriages," which are usually incorrectly represented as having been adopted for the purposes of revolution and anarchy only. An "advanced" young man and girl went through the marriage ceremony; the young husband escorted his bride to the foreign university of her choice, and left her there, or remained to study; but the marriage remained a mere form.

Sonya's sister and that sister's friend resolved to escape from parental "tyranny" by this means. They made their choice of a young professor in the university, whom they knew by reputation only, called on him (in company with the ever-present and admiring Sonya), and proposed that he should marry one of them at pleasure, in order that they might acquire freedom. The girls had made the compact that whichever of them was chosen should take the other abroad for study under the guise of a pleasure-trip, to which the obdurate parents would make no objection. The professor gravely declined, and courteously bowed them out. Sonya met him in society fifteen years later, and they had a hearty laugh over the memory of this extraordinary scene.

The next venture of these undaunted girls was, in a way, more successful, though it also had a surprise in store for them. They proposed to a talented young student of great promise, but the proposal was made in society, with far less solemnity than on the previous occasion. To their satisfaction — and horror — he agreed, with a slight change in the program, which was that he should marry Sonya. As they at once foresaw, General Krukovsky sternly refused to allow his younger daughter to marry while her elder sister was still unmarried.

But Sonya was capable of desperate deeds. One evening, just before the arrival of the guests for a dinner-party, she stole out of the house, aided by Aniuta, and went to the lodgings of Vladimir Kovalevsky, the young student, and there awaited results. General Krukovsky discovered the absence of his daughter just as the company was about to sit down at table, and in answer to his inquiries Aniuta told him that Sonya had gone out alone (an unheard-of thing, especially at that late hour, in that land and class), and had left a note on her dressing-

table. Half an hour later General Krukovsky led his daughter and Vladimir Kovalevsky into the dining-room, and presented them to his guests as betrothed bride and groom.

After the wedding the Kovalevskys lived for a time in St. Petersburg. Then they went abroad, and Sonya began her long course of studies at the German universities. She took with her a talented and ambitious Russian girl who was eager for instruction, to make whose acquaintance she had gone expressly to Moscow. What we know of Sonya's life during the long years of preparation which led to her fame, we know from this friend, who rarely quitted her side. A little later on Aniuta and her friend joined the Kovalevskys. But Aniuta and her friend frowned on the cordial friendship which had sprung up between Kovalevsky and his nominal wife, as a treachery to the cause of learning and of Russia, and they made Kovalevsky so uncomfortable that he fled to another university. Aniuta did not long pursue her studies. She had a peculiar and exciting career in Paris, under the Commune and elsewhere. But Sonya remained faithful and devoted to her, even to the detriment of her own interests, until Aniuta's death.

After winning many degrees and triumphs, Sonya was invited to go to Stockholm as privat-docent. She soon became professor at the university—the first woman admitted to that honor in Europe. The person who brought this about was Professor Mittag-Leffler. Sonya's intimate friend during her residence in Sweden was his sister, Anna Carlotta Leffler (Fru Edgren by her first marriage, the Duchessa di Cajanello by her second marriage to a mathematician of Naples). She collected information from all of Sonya's Russian friends, welded it with Sonya's letters to her brother and herself, and with her own personal recollections, and thus has given us a biography, from the date of the fictitious marriage, which has very nearly the value of an autobiography. The duchess's experience and ability as a novelist have enabled her to explain her famous friend's phases of character in a very enlightening and instructive manner.

The one thing for which Sonya Kovalevsky was conspicuous, in spite of her masculine learning, was her feminine foibles, contradictions, and dependence. She was so essentially and hopelessly feminine that even absorption in the most exact of all sciences failed to destroy the bloom of that old-fashioned, charming ideal, except in the point of carelessness as to her attire. In ordinary life she was as helpless as a child, and to the day of her death she never learned self-reliance. She was unwilling

to be wife to Vladimir Kovalevsky in more than name; yet she was equally unwilling to live apart from him, and she made incessant demands on his patience, sympathy, and aid. When their relations were at last readjusted, she was rather happy, for a time, like any commonplace, untalented woman, with him and her little daughter; but her husband never lost his identity in hers to the absolute degree which her intense, absorbing love demanded. This was in keeping with the craving of her childhood for the exclusive love, the utter devotion, of any one whom she liked.

After her husband's untimely death she alternately craved another absorbing affection and cared for nothing but her mathematical studies and the literary work which she executed alone, or in collaboration with the Duchessa di Cajanello. The latter was obliged to renounce this collaboration because she found that, while Sonya excited to vigorous thought all who came in contact with her, she absorbed their personality. Therefore the duchess was forced to leave Sweden in order to recover the right to her own individuality.

Nevertheless, Sonya's modesty amid her triumphs charmed every one; her delightfully dependent helplessness fascinated every man who came near her; while at times her love for woman's work, like embroidery, and her absolute talent for doing nothing for long intervals, drove Professor Mittag-Leffler to despair.

When, at last, she had found a man who entirely answered her requirements, she was radiantly happy until she discovered that he expected her to renounce her mathematical pursuits, merge her identity in his, and become simply his wife. Then she was in profound despair, though she could not understand his refusal to sink his identity in hers. Over and over again she made up her mind irrevocably, first in one way, then in the other. She had obtained all that the world had to offer—love, distinction, and fame; yet she was not satisfied or happy.

Notwithstanding her genius, Professor Sonya Kovalevsky was always mentally dependent upon a man. We have her written confession that she lectured better when Professor Mittag-Leffler was in the audience. Notwithstanding her solid contributions to applied mathematics, she originated nothing; she merely developed the ideas of her teachers.

What is the conclusion of the whole matter? Setting aside all partizan questions, it would seem to be this: that a masculine head united to a feminine heart is likely to prove a very unhappy combination for a woman.