

### LOVED and LOST

I shall never forget the joy with which I received the news of my appointment. It was a year after I left the university. Strange to say, my first feeling as I received my appointment as teacher in the female gymnasium of the city of N. had nothing to do with the improvement in our economical status which it implied. I remember that feeling so clearly that it seems as if it had all happened but an hour ago. Maybe it is because of the occurrence which it foreshadowed and which was destined to leave such a deep trace on my life that I recall it so vividly every time I think of it. However that may be, the first exclamation which I made mentally as I received a letter announcing my appointment was not, "Now I shall have about 100 rubles a month!" but, "Now I shall teach a class of beautiful girls and fall in love!"

Do not laugh. If you had been brought up under the same conditions, you would be in a similar flurry. I was what is called a good boy and never left my books. When in St. Petersburg, I was ever trembling lest I should fail to pass my examinations and thus cause mother unnecessary expense and worry. Besides, I had inherited from my father a retiring, studious nature, and the very thought of young ladies would make my heart beat fast with a feeling of diffidence and timidity. When I learned about the gymnasium where I was to teach physics, I beheld a class made up of twenty or thirty beauties. Why all beauties I could not have explained, but there they were—all young and rosy cheeked, all tall and all with bashful blue eyes.

I, too, grew bashful as I thought of them in their brown dresses and black aprons. They lured me, caressed my soul, agitated my heart, threw me into a disquieting ecstasy which was as novel to me as it was sweet and painful.

It had taken me three hours to dress. I was to make my first appearance at the gymnasium, and my first lesson was in the highest class, which was made up of girls of seventeen or eighteen. No student preparing for examination ever trembled as I did on that morning. It was as if instead of scholars I was to face twenty or thirty ruthless examiners, each with an incisive pair of eyes ready to pounce upon my poor bashful self. I could hear them giggle at my expense, make jokes about my awkwardness, my necktie, my looks.

When I entered the classroom, I struck an attitude of exaggerated severity. To prove to myself that I was not afraid of the girls I spoke ridiculously loud. I almost shouted. As I went on explaining the distinction between chemistry and physics I frowned on my class, looked daggers at the front row and altogether behaved as if I bore them a personal grudge.

"Isn't he stern?" I overheard one girl whisper to another. A thrill of pride ran through me. "You're all right," I said to myself, and, elated with the impression I had produced, I began to feel more at ease and to stride up and down the room with the manner of an old timer. I was in the seventh heaven. Two girls were talking in the rear seats.

"Silence!" I thundered.

There was a suppressed chuckle at this, and my heart sank within me. I was the most miserable wretch in the world.

When I got home, I lay down on my lounge to think over I did not know what, and as I tried to pass the girls in review it came over me that I had not made out a single face. I could not say whether they were pretty or homely, dark or fair. A blurred image of young ladies in gymnasium uniform was all I had carried away.

The next time I had a lesson in the same class I called out Mlle. Ryshkina. She had evidently given much time to her lesson, but she had it all wrong, and, strange to say, the more she blundered the more I liked to hear her recite. It was so charming to hear her go on with the explanation which she did not understand herself. You should have heard her rattle on about phenomena and laws. To judge from her manner one would have thought she was sure of her ground and felt able to give cards and spades to her teacher. Her dark brown eyes blazed with enthusiasm, and as she recited she gently jerked her head and now and then waved her hand. There was grace in her movements.

"This is the one I am going to fall in love with," I said to myself, and a week or two later I was so far gone that I was afraid of my own shadow. Mlle. Ryshkina and the other girls in the class seemed to have discovered the secret of my

heart, to make fun of me, to think of nothing but my insane love for Maria Vasilyevna Ryshkina. Suppose the director finds it out? Why, that would be terrible. The shame of it! Besides it might lead to all sorts of disagreeable situations and finally to my losing the position.

The teacher of mathematics in the higher classes of the male gymnasium fell sick, and the work was divided between another man and myself. It only took me one hour a day and did not in the least interfere with my lessons at the female gymnasium.

The most stupid member of the eighth class was a fellow named Krassoff. He did not seem to have a clear idea as to the difference between the size of an angle and the length of its sides. How they had passed him to the highest class was more than I could understand. But he was very diligent, and his struggles with his geometry (we were reviewing the curriculum of the lower classes for the final examinations) touched my heart.

I was so madly in love that I seemed to be mutely praying everybody to help me convey my feeling to the young lady to whom I dared not speak except in the stern accents of a teacher addressing his pupil. I had never been in such a meek, almost tearful, mood. I was the kindest man in the world, and every sufferer or victim aroused my sympathy. I invited Krassoff to my house, gave him a few private lessons, patiently went over the elements of the subject with him, and, flushed with success, I spoke to him of my past and got him to tell me about himself.

Outside of his studies he proved to be quite a sensible fellow. He even had a sort of humor which I thought delightful. I also liked his honest face and his manly figure. As to him, he was rather shy and slow to cast off all restraint, but one evening, after a few hearty words from me, the ice suddenly broke, and he said:

"Ah, Semyon Semyonovitch, I know I am stupid and that it's no use studying. But I am in love with an angel, and it is for her sake that I am sitting up nights, trying to drive my lessons through this iron forehead. She would take me as I am. She said so. But I pledged myself to be an educated man, to be worthy of her."

"Tell me who she is," I commanded him, pressing his hand and all but falling on his neck and kissing him. It was all I could do to keep myself from giving away my own secret.

"You know her," he answered. "She is your scholar. It's Mlle. Ryshkina. She says you are an angel."

I let go his hand. I felt as though the floor was giving way under me, but at the next moment I was overcome with fear lest he should divine the cause of my sudden change, and, putting on a mask, I fell to clapping my hands.

"Bravo! Glad to hear it, old boy!" I shouted. Of course my voice did not ring true, but Krassoff was in a ferment of all sorts of feelings, so he did not notice it.

Eight years have passed. Krassoff is practicing law. He is quite successful, and often as I make my way home after lessons I meet Maria Vasilyevna driving. I don't call on them. Am I still in love? I hardly think I am. But so far I have not been interested in any other woman in the same way in which I was in her. Maybe I had in me just love enough for one attachment; maybe I am still destined to love and to be loved. At all events, my heart feels so empty, so empty! Ah, if you knew how hard it is to live as I do!

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