

The Memoirs of a Mother

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INTRODUCTION TO " A MOTHER "

I had known Marie Alexandrovna ever since we were children. As so often happens with young people, there was no suggestion of love-making about our companionship, with the possible exception of one evening when she was at our house and we played " Ladies and Gentlemen." She was fifteen, with plump, rosy hands, beautiful dark eyes, and a thick plait of black hair. I was so impressed by her during that evening that I imagined that I was in love with her. But that was the only time; during all the rest of our forty years' acquaintance we were on those excellent terms of friendship which exist between a man and a woman who mutually respect each other, which are so delightful when – as in our case – they are free from any idea of love-making.

I got a lot of enjoyment out of our friendship, and it taught me a great deal. I have never known a woman who more perfectly typified the good wife, the good mother. Through her I learned much, and came to understand many things.

I saw her for the last time last year, only a month before her death, which neither of us expected. She had just settled down to live alone with Barbara, her cook, in the grounds of a monastery. It was very strange to see this mother of eight children – this woman who had nearly fifty grandchildren – living alone in that way. But there was an evident finality about her determination to live by herself for the rest of her days in spite of the more or less sincere invitations of her family. As I knew her to be, I will not say a free-thinker, for she never laid any stress on that, but one who thought for herself with courage and common sense, I was puzzled at first to see her taking up her abode in the precincts of a monastery.

I knew that her heart was too full of real feeling to have any room for superstition, and I was well aware of her hatred of hypocrisy and of everything Pharisaical. Then suddenly came this house close to the monastery, this regular attendance at church services, and this complete submission to the guidance of the priest, Father Nicodim, though all this was done unostentatiously and with moderation, as if she were somewhat ashamed of it.

When we met it was evident that she wished to avoid all discussion of her reasons for choosing a life of that sort. But I think that I understood. Although she had a sceptical mind, it was dominated by the fulness of her heart. When, after forty years of household

activity, she found that all her children had outgrown the need for her care, she was at a loose end, and it became necessary to seek some fresh occupation for her heart, some fresh outlet for her feelings. Since the homes of her children could not satisfy her cravings, she decided to go into retreat, hoping that she would find the solace which others found in seclusion, the consolation of religion. Though her pride, both on her own account and for the sake of her children, prevented her from giving more than the merest hint of the truth, there could be no doubt that she was unhappy.

I knew all her children, and when I inquired after them she answered reluctantly, for she never blamed them. But I could see what a tragedy, or rather, what a series of tragedies lay buried in her heart.

"Yes, Volodia has done very well," she said. " He is President of the Chamber, and has bought an estate. ... Yes, his children are growing up – three boys and two girls," and as she stopped talking her black eyebrows were contracted into a frown, and I could see that she was making an effort to prevent herself from expressing her thoughts, trying to rid herself of them.

"Well, and Basil?"

" Basil is just the same; you know the sort of man he is."

" Still devoted to society? " it h

1 CS.

" Has he any children? "

"Three."

That is how we talked when her sons and daughters were our subject of conversation.

She would rather talk of Peter than of the others. He was the failure of the family – he had squandered all that he had, did not pay his debts, and caused his mother more distress than any of them. But he was her best-beloved in spite of his waywardness, for she saw, as she put it, his " heart of gold."

There is often a peculiar charm about the reminiscences of those who have gone through hidden sorrows, and it was only when we touched on the days of her careless youth that she let herself go. Our last talk was the best of them all, so delightful that I did not leave her home until after midnight. It was full of tender sympathy. It was about Peter Nikiforovich, the first tutor her children ever had. Fie was a graduate of Moscow University, and he died of consumption in her house. He was a remarkable man, and had exercised a great influence over her. Though she did not realise it, he was the only man whom she could, or did, love besides her husband.

We talked about him and about his theories of life, views which I had known and shared at the time. He was not exactly a disciple of Rousseau, though he knew and approved of his theories, but he had a mind of the same type. He very much resembled our usual conception of the wise men of antiquity. He was full of the gentle humility of unconscious Christianity. Though he was convinced that he hated the teachings of Christianity, his whole life was one long self-sacrifice. He was obviously wretched when he could find no opportunity to deny himself something for the sake of others, and it must be something that could only be relinquished with suffering and difficulty. Then he was really happy. He was as innocent as a child and as tender as a woman.

There may be some doubt as to whether she loved him; but there could be absolutely no doubt that she was his only love, his idol, for any one who ever saw him in her presence. To banish any shadow of question, it was quite enough to watch his great, round, blue eyes following her every movement, reflecting every shade of expression on her face; frail and attenuated as he was, in his shapeless, ill-fitting coat, it was more than enough to see him draw himself up, to note how he bent or turned toward the spot which she occupied.

Alexis Nicolaevich, her late husband, knew it, and did not mind in the least, frequently leaving him alone with her and the children for whole evenings. The children knew it. They loved both their mother and their tutor, and thought it only natural that their mother and their tutor should love one another.

Alexis Nicolaevich's only precaution was to call him "Peter the Wise." He, too, loved him and respected him; indeed, he could not help respecting him for his exceptional affectionate devotion to the children, and for the unusual loftiness of his morality; and never for a moment did he think of passion between him and his wife as a possibility. But I am inclined to believe that she did love him. His death was not only a deep grief, but a bereavement. Certain sides of her nature, the best, the fundamental, the most essential, withered away after his death.

So we talked about him, and about his opinions on life; how he had believed that the highest morality lay in taking from others as little as possible, and in giving to others as much as possible of oneself, of one's soul; and how, in order that one might take as little as possible, he believed that one should cultivate what Plato ranked as the highest virtue, abstinence: that one should sleep on a plank bed, wear the same clothing winter and summer, have bread and water for one's nourishment, or, as a great indulgence, milk. (That was how he had lived, and Marie Alexandrovna thought that that was how he had ruined his health.) He had held that, to equip oneself for giving to others, it was essential to develop one's spiritual forces, chief among which was love, dynamic love, devoted to service in life, to uplifting of life. He would have brought up the children on these lines if he could have had his way; but their parents insisted upon some concession to convention, and an excellent compromise was adopted. But unfortunately, his régime did not last

long, as he only lived with them for four years.

" Just think of it," said Marie Alexandrovna, " I have taken to reading religious tracts, I listen to Father Nicodim's sermons, and believe me "— here her smiling eyes shone with a glance so bright that it brought to mind the independence of thought which was so characteristic of her — " believe me, all these pious exhortations are infinitely inferior to the sayings of Peter Nikiforovich. They deal with the same things, but on a much lower plane. But, above all, he taught one not so much by precept as by practice. And how did he do it? Why, his whole life was a flame, and it consumed him. Do you remember when Mitia and Vera had scarlatina — you were staying with us — do you remember how he sat up at night with them, but insisted upon going on with his lessons with the older children during the day? He regarded it as a sacred duty. And then, when Barbara's boy was ill, he did the same thing, and was quite angry because we would not have the child moved to our house. Barbara was talking about him only the other day. Then when Vania, the page boy, broke his bust of some sage or other, do you remember how, after scolding him, he went out of his way to atone for his anger, begged the boy's pardon, and bought him a ticket for the circus. He was a wonderful man. He insisted that the sort of life we led was not worth living, and begged my husband to give up our land to the peasants and to live by his own labour. Alexander only laughed. But the advice had been given quite earnestly, from a sense of duty.

" He had arrived at that conclusion, and he was right. Yet we went on living just as others did, and what was the result ? I made a round of visits last year, to all my children except Peter. Well, what did I find? Were they happy? Still it was not possible to alter everything as he wanted. It was not for nothing that the first man fell and that sin came into the world."

That was our last talk. " I have done a great deal of thinking in my loneliness," she said; " indeed, I have done more than thinking; I have done some writing," and she smiled at me with an air of embarrassment that gave her aged face a sweet, wistful expression. " I have put down my thoughts about all these things, or rather, the outcome of my experiences. I kept a diary before I was married, and afterwards too, for a time. But I gave it up later, when it all began, about ten years ago." She did not say what had begun, but I knew that she meant the strained relations with her older children, the misunderstandings, and the contentions. She had had the entire control of the family estate after her husband's death. " In looking through my possessions here I found my old diaries and re-read them. There is a good deal in them that is silly, but there is a good deal that is good, and "— again the same smile —" instructive, too. I could not make up my mind at first whether to burn them or not, so I asked Father Nicodim, and he said, ' Burn them.' But that was all nonsense, you know. He could not understand. So I didn't burn them." How well I recognised her characteristic illogical consistency. She was obedient to Father Nicodim in most things, and had settled near the monastery to be under his guidance; but when she thought that his judgment was irrational, she did what seemed best to her.

" Not only did I not burn them, I wrote two more volumes. There is nothing to do here, so I wrote what I thought about it all, and when I die – I don't mean to die yet: my mother lived to be seventy, and my father eighty – but when I do die these books are to be sent to you. You are to read them and to decide whether there is anything of real value in them, and if there is, you will let others share it. For no one seems to know. We go on suffering incessantly for our children, from before their birth until the time comes when they begin to insist on their rights. Think of the sleepless nights, the anxiety, the pain and the despair we go through. It would not matter if they really loved us, or even if they were happy. But they don't, and they aren't. I don't care what you say, there is something wrong somewhere. That is what I have written about. You will read it when I am dead. But I have said enough about it."

I promised, though I assured her that I did not expect to outlive her. We parted, and a month later I received the news of her death. Feeling faint at vespers, she had sat down on a little folding stool she carried with her, leaned her head against the wall, and died. It was some sort of heart trouble. I went to the funeral. All the children were there except Helen, who was abroad, and Mitia – the one who had had scarlatina – who could not go because he was in the Caucasus undergoing a cure for a serious illness.

It was an ostentatious funeral, and its display inspired the monks with more respect for her than they had felt while she was alive. Her belongings were divided up rather as keepsakes than with a view to any intrinsic value. In memory of our friendship, I received her malachite paper-weight as well as six old leather-bound diaries and four new ordinary manuscript books in which, as she had said, she had written " about it all " while living near the monastery.

The book contains this remarkable woman's touching and instructive story.

As I knew her and her husband throughout their life together, and watched the growth and development of her children from the time of their birth to the time of their marriage, I have been able to fill in any omission in her memoirs from my own reminiscences whenever it has seemed necessary to make the story more clear.

THE MEMOIRS OF A MOTHER

It is the 3rd of May 1857, and I begin a new diary. My old one covers a long period, but I did not write it properly; there was too much introspection, too much sentimentality and nonsense – about being in love with Ivan Zakharovich – the desire to be famous, or to enter a convent. I have just read over a good deal that was nice, written when I was fifteen or sixteen. But now it is quite different. I am twenty, and I really am in love and in a state of ecstasy. I do not worry myself with fears as to whether it is real, or whether this is what true love should be, or whether my love is inadequate; on the contrary, I am afraid that this is the real

thing, fate; that I love far, far too much, and cannot help loving, and I am afraid. There is something serious and dignified about him – his face, the sound of his voice, his cheery word – in spite of the fact that he is always bright and laughing, and can turn everything round so that it becomes graceful, clever, and humorous. Every one is amused, and so am I; yet there is something solemn about it.

Our eyes meet; they pierce deep, deep down into the other's, and go farther and farther. I am frightened, and I see that he is too.

But I will describe it all in order. He is the son of Anna Pavlovna Lutkovsky, and is related to the Obolenskys and the Mikashins; his eldest brother is the Lutkovsky who distinguished himself at the siege of Sevastopol, and he himself, Alexis,* is mine, yes mine! He was in Sevastopol, too, but only because he did not want to be safe at home when other men were dying there. He is above ambition. After the campaign he left the army, and did some sort of work in Petersburg; now he has come to our province, and is on the Committee. He is young, but he is liked and appreciated. Michel brought him to our house, and he became intimate with us at once. Mother took a fancy to him, and was very friendly. Lather, as usual with all young men who wished to marry his daughters, received him coldly. He at once began to pay attention to Madia, the sort of attention men do pay to girls of sixteen; but in my innermost heart I knew at once that it was I, only I did not dare to own it even to myself. He used to come often; and from the first day, although nothing was said, I knew that it was all over – that it was he. Yes–

* " Peter " is the original. terday, on leaving, he pressed my hand. We were on the landing of the staircase. I do not know why, but I felt that I was blushing. He looked at me, and he blushed also; and lost his head so completely that he turned round and ran downstairs, dropped his hat, picked it up, and stopped outside in the porch.

I went upstairs and looked out of the window. His carriage drove up, but he did not get in. I leaned out to look into the porch. He was standing there, stroking his beard into his mouth, and biting it. I was afraid he might turn round, and so I moved away from the window, and at the same moment I heard his step on the stairs. He was running up quickly, impetuously. How I knew I cannot say, but I went to the door and stood still, waiting. My heart ceased to beat; it seemed to stand still, and my breast heaved painfully, yet joyfully. Why I knew I cannot say. But I knew. He might very well have run upstairs and said, " I beg your pardon, I forgot my cigarettes," or something like that. That might very well have happened. What should I have done then? But no, that was impossible. What was to be – was. His face was solemn, timid, determined, and joyful. His eyes shone, his lips quivered. He had his overcoat on, and held his hat in his hand. We were alone – every one was on the veranda, " Marie Alexandrovna," * he said, stopping on the last step, " it's best to have it over once for all than to go on in misery, and perhaps to upset you." I felt ill at ease, but painfully happy. Those dear eyes, that beautiful forehead, those trembling lips, so much more

used to smiling, and the timidity of the strong energetic figure! I felt sobs rising to my throat. I expect he saw the expression on my face.

" Marie Alexandrovna,* you know what I want to tell you, don't you? "

" I don't know" ... I began. "Yes, I do."

" Yes," he went on, " you know what I mean to ask you, and do not dare." He broke off, and then, suddenly, as though angry with himself: " Well, what is to be, will be. Can you love me as I love you ; be my wife. Yes or no ? "

I could not speak. Joy suffocated me. I held out my hand. He took it and kissed it. " Is it really yes? Truly? Yes? You knew, didn't you. I have suffered so long. I need not go away? "

" No, no."

I said that I loved him, and we kissed; and that first kiss seemed strange and unpleasant rather than pleasant, our lips just touching the other's face,

* " Barbara Nicolaevna " in the original. as though by chance. He went down and sent away his carriage, and I ran off to mother. She went to father, who came out of his room. It was all over – we were engaged. It was past one when he left, and he will come again tomorrow, and the wedding will be in a month. He wanted it to be next week, but mother would not hear of it.

It was fifty-seven years ago. The war was just over. The Voronov household was busy with wedding preparations. The second daughter, Marie,* was engaged to Alexis Lutkovsky.f They had known each other since childhood.J They had played and danced together. Now he had returned from Sevastopol, with the rank of lieutenant.

At the very height of the war he had left the civil service to join a regiment as an ensign. On his return he could not make up his mind what to do. He felt nothing but contempt for military service, especially in the Guards, and did not want to go on with it in time of peace. But an uncle wanted him to be his aide-de-camp in Kiev. A cousin offered him a post at Constantinople. His

* " Barbara " in the original.

+ " Evgraf Lotukhine " in the original.

t See p. 294. where she says, " Michel introduced him to our house," etc.

ex-chief asked him to go back to his former post. He had plenty of friends and relatives, and they were all fond of him. They were not quite fond enough of him to miss him when he was not there, but they

were fond enough to say when he appeared (at least most of them), " Ah, Alexis ! * how jolly! " He was never in any one's way, and most people liked to have him about, though for very different reasons. He could tell stories, and sing or play the guitar in first-rate fashion. But, above all, he never gave himself any airs. He was clever, good-looking, good-natured, and sympathetic. While he was looking round and discussing where and with whom he should work, and while he was thinking the matter over and weighing it very carefully, notwithstanding his seeming indifference, he met the Voronovs in Moscow. They invited him to their country-house, where he went and stayed a week; then left, and a week later returned and proposed.

He was accepted with great pleasure. It was a good match. He became engaged.

" There's nothing to be particularly pleased about," said old Voronov to his wife, who was standing near his desk looking at him wistfully.

" He is good-natured."

• " Grisha " in the original.

" Good-natured, indeed! That's not the point. But, as a matter of fact, he has lived: he has lived a good deal. I know the Lutkovsky * stock. What has he got except good intentions and his service? What we can give them will not provide for them."

" But they love one another, and they have been so frank about it," she said. She was so gentle and so mild.

" Yes, of course, he's all right. They're all alike, but I wanted some one better for Marie.f She is such an open-hearted, tender little soul, There was something else I had wished for. But it can't be helped. Come." And they left the room together.

Just at first father seemed displeased. No, not exactly displeased, but sad, not quite himself. I know him. Just as though he did not like him. I cannot understand it; I am not the only one. It is not because I am engaged to him, but nobility, truthfulness, and purity are so clearly written all over his being that one could not find more of them anywhere. It is evident that what is in his mind is on his tongue: he has nothing to hide. He only hides his own noble qualities. He will not, he cannot bear to speak of his Sevastopol ex-

*"Lotukhine" in the original.

t "Barbara" in the original.

plaits, nor about Michel. He blushed when I spoke of him. I thank Thee, Lord. I desire nothing, nothing more.

Lutkovsky * went to Moscow to make preparations for the wedding. He stopped at the chevalier, and there on the stairway he met Souschov. " Ah, Alexis, f is it true that you are going to get married? "

" Yes, it is true."

" I congratulate you. I know them. It is a charming family. I knew your bride too. She is beautiful. Let us have dinner together."

They dined together, and had first one bottle, then a second.

" Let's be off. Let's drive somewhere; there's nothing else to do."

They drove to the Hermitage, which had only just been opened. As they approached the theatre they met Anna. Anna did not know; but even if she had known he was going to be married, she would not have altered her manner, and would have smiled and shown her dimples with even more delight.

"Oh, there, how dull you are; come along! " She took his hand.

*"Lotukhine" in the original.

+ " Grisha" in the original.

" Take care," said Souschov behind them. " Directly, directly."

Lutkovsky * walked as far as the theatre with her, and then handed her over to Basil, whom he happened to meet there.

" No, it is wrong. I will go home. Why did I come? "

Notwithstanding urgent requests to remain, he went home. In his hotel room he drank two glasses of seltzer water, and sat down at the table to make up his accounts. In the morning he had to go out on business – to borrow money. His brother had refused to lend him any, and so he had got it from a money-lender. He sat there making his calculations, and all the while his thoughts returned to Anna, and he felt annoyed that he had refused her, though he felt proud that he had done so.

He took out Marie's f photograph. She was a strong, well-developed, slender Russian beauty. He looked at the picture with admiration, then put it in front of him and went on with his work.

Suddenly in the corridor he heard the voices of Anna and Souschov. He was . leading her straight to his door.

* " Lotukhine " in the original.

t" Barbara's" in the original.

" Alexis,* how could you? "

She entered his room.

Next morning Lutkovsky f went to breakfast with Souschov, who reproached him.

" You must know how terribly this would grieve her."

" Of course I do. Don't worry. I am as dumb as a fish. May I – Alexis J has returned from Moscow, the same clear, child-like soul. I see he is unhappy because he is not rich, for my sake – only for my sake. Last night the conversation turned on children, on our future children. I cannot believe I shall have children, or even one child. It is impossible. I shall die of happiness. Oh, but if I had them, how could I love them and him? The two things do not go together. Well, what is to be will be."

A month later the wedding took place. In the autumn Lutkovsky § got a post in the Civil Service, and they went to St. Petersburg. In September they discovered that she was going to be a mother, and in March her first son was born.

The accouchement, as is usually the case, was unexpected, and confusion ensued just because

* " Grisha " in the original.

+ " Lotukhine " in the original.

İ " Grisha " in the original.

§" Lotukhine" in the original.

every one had wanted to foresee everything, and things actually turned out quite different.

? [This is only a fragment, and contains some inconsistencies and some confusion in the names, which have been corrected.– Editor.]