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Beauty and the Beast

A Story of Old Russia

I.

We are about to relate a story of mingled fact and fancy. The facts are borrowed from the Russian author, Petjerski; the fancy is our own. Our task will chiefly be to soften the outlines of incidents almost too sharp and rugged for literary use, to supply them with the necessary coloring and sentiment, and to give a coherent and proportioned shape to the irregular fragments of an old chronicle. We know something, from other sources, of the customs described, something of the character of the people from personal observation, and may therefore the more freely take such liberties as we choose with the rude, vigorous sketches of the Russian original. One who happens to have read the work of Villebois can easily comprehend the existence of a state of society, on the banks of the Volga, a hundred years ago, which is now impossible, and will soon become incredible. What is strangest in our narrative has been declared to be true.

II.

We are in Kinesma, a small town on the Volga, between Kostroma and Nijni-Novgorod. The time is about the middle of the last century, and the month October.

There was trouble one day, in the palace of Prince Alexis, of Kinesma. This edifice, with its massive white walls, and its pyramidal roofs of green copper, stood upon a gentle mound to the eastward of the town, overlooking it, a broad stretch of the Volga, and the opposite shore. On a similar hill, to the westward, stood the church, glittering with its dozen bulging, golden domes. These two establishments divided the sovereignty of Kinesma between them.

Prince Alexis owned the bodies of the inhabitants, (with the exception of a few merchants and tradesmen,) and the Archimandrite Sergius owned their souls. But the shadow of the former stretched also over other villages, far beyond the ring of the wooded horizon. The number of his serfs was ten thousand, and his rule over them was even less disputed than theirs over their domestic animals.

The inhabitants of the place had noticed with dismay that the slumber-flag had not been hoisted on the castle, although it was half an hour after the usual time. So rare a circumstance betokened sudden wrath or disaster, on the part of Prince Alexis. Long experience had prepared the people for anything that might happen, and they were consequently not astonished at the singular event which presently transpired.

The fact is, that in the first place, the dinner had been prolonged full ten minutes beyond its accustomed limit, owing to a discussion between the Prince, his wife, the Princess Martha, and their son Prince Boris. The last was to leave for St. Petersburg in a fortnight, and wished to have his departure preceded by a festival at the castle. The Princess Martha was always ready to second the desires of her only child. Between the two they had pressed some twenty or thirty thousand rubles out of the old Prince, for the winter diversions of the young one. The festival, to be sure, would have been a slight expenditure for a noble of such immense wealth as Prince Alexis; but he never liked his wife, and he took a stubborn pleasure in thwarting her wishes. It was no satisfaction that Boris resembled her in character. That weak successor to the sovereignty of Kinesma preferred a game of cards to a bear hunt, and could never drink more than a quart of vodki without becoming dizzy and sick.

"Ugh!" Prince Alexis would cry, with a shudder of disgust, "the whelp barks after the dam!"

A state dinner he might give; but a festival, with dances, dramatic representations, burning tar-barrels, and cannon,—no! He knitted his heavy brows and drank deeply, and his fiery gray

eyes shot such incessant glances from side to side that Boris and the Princess Martha could not exchange a single wink of silent advice. The pet bear, Mishka, plied with strong wines, which Prince Alexis poured out for him into a golden basin, became at last comically drunk, and in endeavoring to execute a dance, lost his balance, and fell at full length on his back.

The Prince burst into a yelling, shrieking fit of laughter. Instantly the yellow-haired serfs in waiting, the Calmucks at the hall-door, and the half-witted dwarf who crawled around the table in his tow shirt, began laughing in chorus, as violently as they could. The Princess Martha and Prince Boris laughed also; and while the old man's eyes were dimmed with streaming tears of mirth, quickly exchanged nods. The sound extended all over the castle, and was heard outside of the walls.

"Father!" said Boris, "let us have the festival, and Mishka shall perform again. Prince Paul of Kostroma would strangle, if he could see him."

"Good, by St. Vladimir!" exclaimed Prince Alexis. "Thou shalt have it, my Borka (meaning little Boris)! Where's Simon Petrovitch? May the Devil scorch that vagabond, if he doesn't do better than the last time! Sasha!"

A broad-shouldered serf stepped forward and stood with bowed head.

"Lock up Simon Petrovitch in the southwestern tower. Send the tailor and the girls to him, to learn their parts. Search everyone of them before they go in, and if anyone dares to carry vodki to the beast, twenty-five lashes on the back!"

Sasha bowed again and departed. Simon Petrovitch was the court-poet of Kinesma. He had a mechanical knack of preparing allegorical diversions which suited the conventional taste of society at that time; but he had also a failing, — he was rarely sober enough to write. Prince Alexis, therefore, was in the habit of locking him up and placing a guard over him, until the inspiration had done its work. The most comely young serfs of both sexes were selected to perform the parts, and the court-tailor

arranged for them the appropriate dresses. It depended very much upon accident — that is to say, the mood of Prince Alexis — whether Simon Petrovitch was rewarded with stripes or rubles.

The matter thus settled, the Prince rose from the table and walked out upon an overhanging balcony, where an immense reclining arm-chair of stuffed leather was ready for his siesta. He preferred this indulgence in the open air; and although the weather was rapidly growing cold, a pelisse of sables enabled him to slumber sweetly in the face of the north wind. An attendant stood with the pelisse outspread; another held the halyards to which was attached the great red slumber-flag, ready to run it up and announce to all Kinesma that the noises of the town must cease; a few seconds more, and all things would have been fixed in their regular daily courses. The Prince, in fact, was just straightening his shoulders to receive the sables; his eyelids were dropping, and his eyes, sinking mechanically with them, fell upon the river-road, at the foot of the hill. Along this road walked a man, wearing the long cloth caftan of a merchant.

Prince Alexis started, and all slumber vanished out of his eyes. He leaned forward for a moment, with a quick, eager expression; then a loud roar, like that of an enraged wild beast, burst from his mouth. He gave a stamp that shook the balcony.

“Dog!” he cried to the trembling attendant, “my cap! my whip!”

The sables fell upon the floor, the cap and whip appeared in a twinkling, and the red slumber-flag was folded up again for the first time in several years, as the Prince stormed out of the castle. The traveller below had heard the cry, — for it might have been heard half a mile. He seemed to have a presentiment of evil, for he had already set off towards the town at full speed.

To explain the occurrence, we must mention one of the Prince’s many peculiar habits. This was, to invite strangers or merchants of the neighborhood to dine with him, and, after regaling them bountifully, to take his pay in subjecting them to all sorts of outrageous tricks, with the help of his band of willing

domestics. Now this particular merchant had been invited, and had attended; but, being a very wide-awake, shrewd person, he saw what was coming, and dexterously slipped away from the banquet without being perceived. The Prince vowed vengeance, on discovering the escape, and he was not a man to forget his word.

Impelled by such opposite passions, both parties ran with quite astonishing speed. The merchant was the taller, but his long caftan, hastily ungirdled, swung behind him and dragged in the air.

The short, booted legs of the Prince beat quicker time, and he grasped his short, heavy, leathern whip more tightly as he saw the space diminishing. They dashed into the town of Kinesma a hundred yards apart. The merchant entered the main street, or bazaar, looking rapidly to right and left, as he ran, in the hope of espying some place of refuge. The terrible voice behind him cried, —

“Stop, scoundrel! I have a crow to pick with you!”

And the tradesmen in their shops looked on and laughed, as well they might, being unconcerned spectators of the fun. The fugitive, therefore, kept straight on, notwithstanding a pond of water glittered across the farther end of the street.

Although Prince Alexis had gained considerably in the race, such violent exercise, after a heavy dinner, deprived him of breath. He again cried, —

“Stop!”

“But the merchant answered, —

“No, Highness! You may come to me, but I will not go to you.”

“Oh, the villian!” growled the Prince, in a hoarse whisper, for he had no more voice.

The pond cut off all further pursuit. Hastily kicking off his loose boots, the merchant plunged into the water, rather than encounter the princely whip, which already began to crack and snap in fierce anticipation. Prince Alexis kicked off his boots and

followed; the pond gradually deepened, and in a minute the tall merchant stood up to his chin in the icy water, and his short pursuer likewise but out of striking distance. The latter coaxed and entreated, but the victim kept his ground.

"You lie, Highness!" he said, boldly. "If you want me, come to me."

"Ah-h-h!" roared the Prince, with chattering teeth, "what a stubborn rascal you are! Come here, and I give you my word that I will not hurt you. Nay," — seeing that the man did not move, — "you shall dine with me as often as you please. You shall be my friend; by St. Vladimir, I like you!"

"Make the sign of the cross, and swear it by all the Saints," said the merchant, composedly.

With a grim smile on his face, the Prince stepped back and shiveringly obeyed. Both then waded out, sat down upon the ground and pulled on their boots; and presently the people of Kinesma beheld the dripping pair walking side by side up the street, conversing in the most cordial manner. The merchant dried his clothes from within, at the castle table; a fresh keg of old Cognac was opened; and although the slumber-flag was not unfurled that afternoon, it flew from the staff and hushed the town nearly all the next day.

III.

The festival granted on behalf of Prince Boris was one of the grandest ever given at the castle. In character it was a singular cross between the old Muscovite revel and the French entertainments which were then introduced by the Empress Elizabeth.

All the nobility, for fifty versts around, including Prince Paul and the chief families of Kostroma, were invited. Simon Petrovitch had been so carefully guarded that his work was actually completed and the parts distributed; his superintendence of the performance, however, was still a matter of doubt, as it was necessary to release him from the tower, and after several days of forced abstinence he always manifested a raging appetite.

Prince Alexis, in spite of this doubt, had been assured by Boris that the dramatic part of the entertainment would not be a failure. When he questioned Sasha, the poet's strong-shouldered guard, the latter winked familiarly and answered with a proverb:

"I sit on the shore and wait for the wind," — which was as much as to say that Sasha had little fear of the result.

The tables were spread in the great hall, where places for one hundred chosen guests were arranged on the floor, while the three or four hundred of minor importance were provided for in the galleries above. By noon the whole party were assembled. The halls and passages of the castle were already permeated with rich and unctuous smells, and a delicate nose might have picked out and arranged, by their finer or coarser vapors, the dishes preparing for the upper and lower tables. One of the parasites of Prince Alexis, a dilapidated nobleman, officiated as Grand Marshal,—an office which more than compensated for the savage charity he received, for it was performed in continual fear and trembling. The Prince had felt the stick of the Great Peter upon his own back, and was ready enough to imitate any custom of the famous monarch.

An orchestra, composed principally of horns and brass instruments, occupied a separate gallery at one end of the dining-hall. The guests were assembled in the adjoining apartments, according to their rank; and when the first loud blast of the instruments announced the beginning of the banquet, two very differently attired and freighted processions of servants made their appearance at the same time. Those intended for the princely table numbered two hundred, — two for each guest. They were the handsomest young men among the ten thousand serfs, clothed in loose white trousers and shirts of pink or lilac silk; their soft golden hair, parted in the middle, fell upon their shoulders, and a band of gold-thread about the brow prevented it from sweeping the dishes they carried. They entered the reception-room, bearing huge trays of sculptured silver, upon which were anchovies, the finest Finnish caviar, sliced oranges, cheese,

and crystal flagons of Cognac, rum, and kummel. There were fewer servants for the remaining guests, who were gathered in a separate chamber, and regaled with the common black caviar, onions, bread, and vodki. At the second blast of trumpets, the two companies set themselves in motion and entered the dining-hall at opposite ends. Our business, however, is only with the principal personages, so we will allow the common crowd quietly to mount to the galleries and satisfy their senses with the coarser viands, while their imagination is stimulated by the sight of the splendor and luxury below.

Prince Alexis entered first, with a pompous, mincing gait, leading the Princess Martha by the tips of her fingers. He wore a caftan of green velvet laced with gold, a huge vest of crimson brocade, and breeches of yellow satin. A wig, resembling clouds boiling in the confluence of opposing winds, surged from his low, broad forehead, and flowed upon his shoulders. As his small, fiery eyes swept the hall, every servant trembled: he was as severe at the commencement as he was reckless at the close of a banquet. The Princess Martha wore a robe of pink satin embroidered with flowers made of small pearls, and a train and head-dress of crimson velvet.

Her emeralds were the finest outside of Moscow, and she wore them all. Her pale, weak, frightened face was quenched in the dazzle of the green fires which shot from her forehead, ears, and bosom, as she moved.

Prince Paul of Kostroma and the Princess Nadejda followed; but on reaching the table, the gentlemen took their seats at the head, while the ladies marched down to the foot. Their seats were determined by their relative rank, and woe to him who was so ignorant or so absent-minded as to make a mistake! The servants had been carefully trained in advance by the Grand Marshal; and whoever took a place above his rank or importance found, when he came to sit down, that his chair had miraculously disappeared, or, not noticing the fact, seated himself absurdly and violently upon the floor. The Prince at the head of the

table, and the Princess at the foot, with their nearest guests of equal rank, ate from dishes of massive gold; the others from silver. As soon as the last of the company had entered the hall, a crowd of jugglers, tumblers, dwarfs, and Calmucks followed, crowding themselves into the corners under the galleries, where they awaited the conclusion of the banquet to display their tricks, and scolded and pummelled each other in the mean time.

On one side of Prince Alexis the bear Mishka took his station. By order of Prince Boris he had been kept from wine for several days, and his small eyes were keener and hungrier than usual. As he rose now and then, impatiently, and sat upon his hind legs, he formed a curious contrast to the Prince's other supporter, the idiot, who sat also in his tow-shirt, with a large pewter basin in his hand. It was difficult to say whether the beast was most man or the man most beast. They eyed each other and watched the motions of their lord with equal jealousy; and the dismal whine of the bear found an echo in the drawling, slaving laugh of the idiot. The Prince glanced from one to the other; they put him in a capital humor, which was not lessened as he perceived an expression of envy pass over the face of Prince Paul.

The dinner commenced with a botvinia — something between a soup and a salad — of wonderful composition. It contained cucumbers, cherries, salt fish, melons, bread, salt, pepper, and wine. While it was being served, four huge fishermen, dressed to represent mermen of the Volga, naked to the waist, with hair crowned with reeds, legs finned with silver tissue from the knees downward, and preposterous scaly tails, which dragged helplessly upon the floor, entered the hall, bearing a broad, shallow tank of silver. In the tank flapped and swam four superb sterlets, their ridgy backs rising out of the water like those of alligators. Great applause welcomed this new and classical adaptation of the old custom of showing the *living* fish, before cooking them, to the guests at the table. The invention was due to Simon Petrovitch, and was (if the truth must be confessed) the

result of certain carefully measured supplies of brandy which Prince Boris himself had carried to the imprisoned poet.

After the sterlets had melted away to their backbones, and the roasted geese had shrunk into drumsticks and breastplates, and here and there a guest's ears began to redden with more rapid blood, Prince Alexis judged that the time for diversion had arrived. He first filled up the idiot's basin with fragments of all the dishes within his reach,— fish, stewed fruits, goose fat, bread, boiled cabbage, and beer, — the idiot grinning with delight all the while, and singing, "Ne uyesjai golubchik moi," (Don't go away, my little pigeon), between the handfuls which he crammed into his mouth. The guests roared with laughter, especially when a juggler or Calmuck stole out from under the gallery, and pretended to have designs upon the basin. Mishka, the bear, had also been well fed, and greedily drank ripe old Malaga from the golden dish. But, alas! he would not dance. Sitting up on his hind legs, with his fore paws hanging before him, he cast a drunken, languishing eye upon the company, lolled out his tongue, and whined with an almost human voice. The domestics, secretly incited by the Grand Marshal, exhausted their ingenuity in coaxing him, but in vain. Finally, one of them took a goblet of wine in one hand, and, embracing Mishka with the other, began to waltz. The bear stretched out his paw and clumsily followed the movements, whirling round and round after the enticing goblet. The orchestra struck up, and the spectacle, though not exactly what Prince Alexis wished, was comical enough to divert the company immensely.

But the close of the performance was not upon the programme. The impatient bear, getting no nearer his goblet, hugged the man violently with the other paw, striking his claws through the thin shirt. The dance-measure was lost; the legs of the two tangled, and they fell to the floor, the bear undermost. With a growl of rage and disappointment, he brought his teeth together through the man's arm, and it might have fared badly with the latter, had not the goblet been refilled by someone and