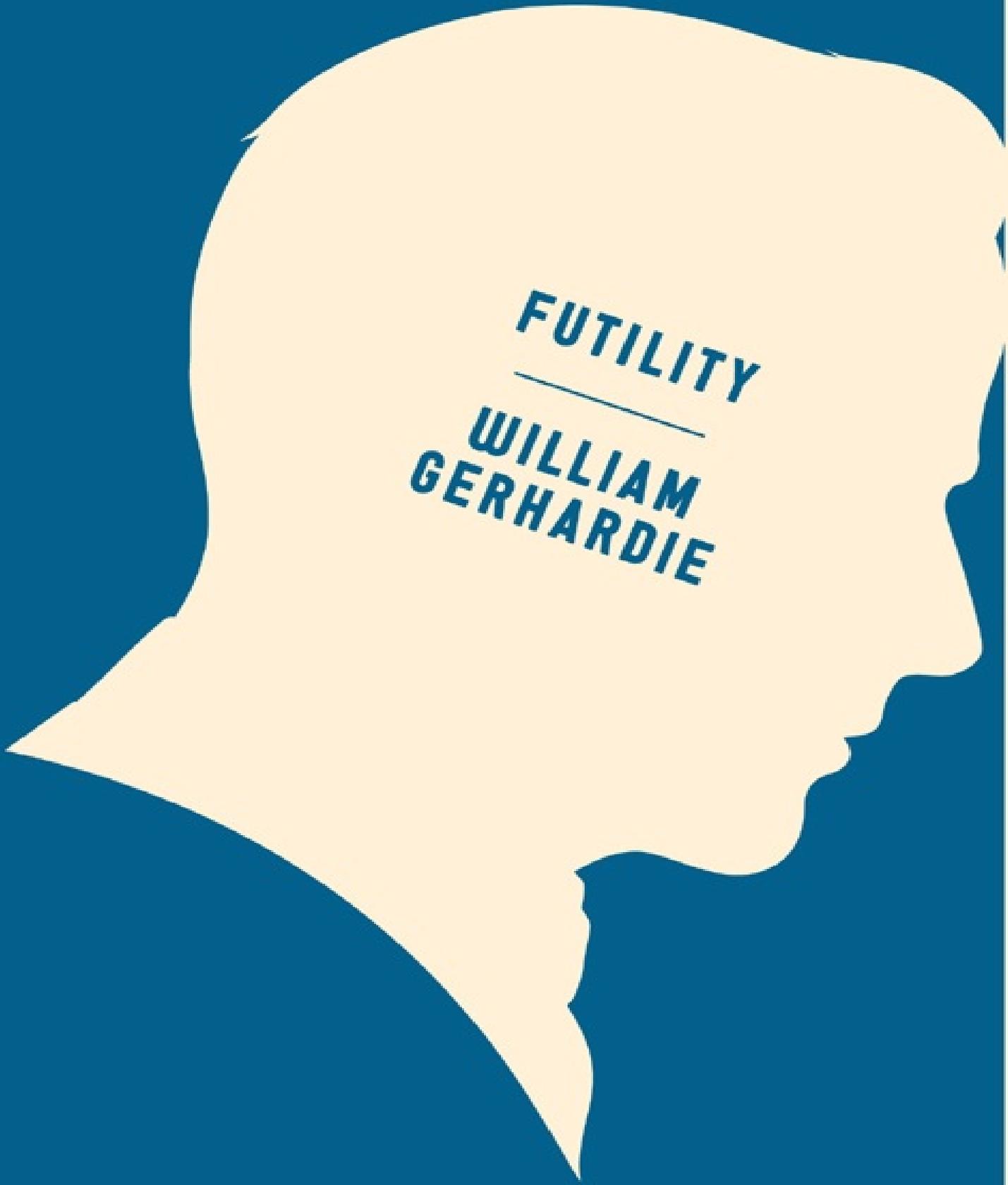


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FUTILITY

**WILLIAM
GERHARDIE**

INTRODUCTION BY
EDITH WHARTON

PRAISE FOR
WILLIAM GERHARDIE
AND *FUTILITY*

“Gerhardie deserves readers ... maybe this time William Gerhardie will join Dawn Powell and Zora Neale Hurston in staying rediscovered.”

—MICHAEL DIRDA, *WASHINGTON POST*

“I have talent, but he has genius.”

—EVELYN WAUGH

“Gerhardie’s work left an indelible impression ... To those of my generation he was the most important new novelist to appear in our young life. We were proud of his early and immediate success, like men who have spotted the right horse.”

—GRAHAM GREENE

“[*Futility*] is a living book.... it is warm. One can put it down and it goes on breathing.”

—KATHERINE MANSFIELD

“Why was there no shouting about Gerhardie’s *Futility*—shouting to reach the suburbs and the country towns? True, devastating. A wonderful book.”

—H.G. WELLS

“Mr. Gerhardie’s novel is extremely modern; but it has bulk and form, a recognisable orbit, and that promise of more to come that one always feels latent in the beginnings of the born novelist.”

—EDITH WHARTON

“The humour of life, the poetry of death, the release of the spirit—these things Gerhardie describes as no prose writer has done before him ... William Gerhardie is our Gogol’s ‘Overcoat.’ We all came out of him.”

—OLIVIA MANNING

“In my opinion Gerhardie has genius.”

—ARNOLD BENNETT

“He is a comic writer of genius ... but his art is profoundly serious.”

—C. P. SNOW

“*Futility* is Gerhardie at his simplest and most effective, as well as a book which saddens with the vastness of the promise not wholly fulfilled.”

—SEAMUS SWEENEY

“William Gerhardie was a writer of great talent and originality whose books need to be rediscovered by each new generation of readers.”

—MICHAEL HOLYROD

“One of the funniest writers of the twentieth century.”

—PHILIP TOYNBEE

FUTILITY

WILLIAM GERHARDIE (1895–1977) was born Gerhardi—he added the final “e” late in life—in St. Petersburg, Russia, the son of British parents who owned a cotton mill there. At 17 they sent him to a British vocational college to prepare him for joining the family business. However Gerhardi disliked the school and at the outbreak of World War I enlisted instead. His language skills led to assignment to the British Mission in Siberia, to work on a propaganda campaign aimed at disrupting the Bolshevik take-over of the country after the Russian Revolution (which had ruined his family and forced them to flee the country). Gerhardie’s work earned him an Order of the British Empire at age 24. Upon his return to England, he enrolled at Oxford and soon produced his first novel, *Futility*, based on his recent experience in Russia. The book won praise from Evelyn Waugh, H.G. Wells, George Bernard Shaw, Edith Wharton, Graham Greene and others—yet did not sell well. While still at school he wrote a critical biography of Chekhov, the first such appreciation of the writer in English, and still cited by scholars as one of the most perceptive. Several critically praised novels followed, including *The Polyglots*, *Doom*, and *Pending Heaven*, and he became the toast of literary London. He was especially doted upon by press magnate Lord Beaverbrook, who tried, unsuccessfully, to increase Gerhardie’s sales by serializing his books in his newspapers. In 1939 Gerhardie stopped publishing, although for the rest of his life he told friends he was working on a novel called *This Present Breath*, a tetralogy in one volume. Falling into poverty, he rarely left his London apartment, and when he died there in 1977, no trace of *This Present Breath* was found.

EDITH WHARTON (1862–1937), the first woman to win a Pulitzer Prize, was the author of more than twenty novels, including *The House of Mirth*, *Ethan Frome*, and *The Age of Innocence*.



THE NEVERSINK LIBRARY

I was by no means the only reader of books on board the Neversink. Several other sailors were diligent readers, though their studies did not lie in the way of belles-lettres. Their favourite authors were such as you may find at the book-stalls around Fulton Market; they were slightly physiological in their nature. My book experiences on board of the frigate proved an example of a fact which every book-lover must have experienced before me, namely, that though public libraries have an imposing air, and doubtless contain invaluable volumes, yet, somehow, the books that prove most agreeable, grateful, and companionable, are those we pick up by chance here and there; those which seem put into our hands by Providence; those which pretend to little, but abound in much. —HERMAN MELVILLE, WHITE JACKET

FUTILITY

A NOVEL ON RUSSIAN THEMES

**WILLIAM
GERHARDIE**

PREFACE BY
EDITH WHARTON



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PREFACE

BY EDITH WHARTON

There are few novelists nowadays, I suppose, who will not readily acknowledge that, in certain most intrinsic qualities of the art, the great Russians are what Henry James once called Balzac, the masters of us all. To many readers of the western world, however, there was—there still is, despite the blinding glare which the Russian disaster has shed on the national character—a recurring sense of bewilderment in trying to trace the motives of the strange, seductive and incoherent people who live in the pages of Dostoievsky, Tolstoi, and their mighty group. In Balzac, at all times, the western mind is at home: even when the presentment is obviously a caricature, one knows what is being caricatured. But there are moments—to me at least—in the greatest of Russian novels, and just as I feel the directing pressure of the novelist most strongly on my shoulder, when somehow I stumble, the path fades to a trail, the trail to a sand-heap, and hopelessly I perceive that the clue is gone, and that I no longer know which way the master is seeking to propel me, because his people are behaving as I never knew people to behave. “Oh, no; we *know* they’re like that, because he says so—but they’re too different!” one groans. And then, perhaps, for enlightenment, one turns to the western novelist, French or English or other, the avowed “authority” who, especially since the war, has undertaken to translate the Russian soul in terms of our vernacular.

Well—I had more than once so turned ... and had vainly hunted, through the familiar scenery of *vodka*, *moujik*, *eikon*, *izba* and all the rest, for the souls of the wooden puppets who seemed to me differentiated only from similar wooden puppets by being called Alexander Son-of-Somebody instead of Mr. Jones or M. Dupont.

Then I fell upon “Futility.” Some one said: “It’s another new novel about Russia”—and every one of my eager feelers curled up in a tight knot of refusal. But I had a railway-journey to make, and the book in my bag—and I began it. And I remember nothing of that railway-journey, of its dust, discomfort, heat and length, because, on the second or third page, I had met living intelligible people, Sons-and-daughters-of-Somebody, as Russian, I vow, as those of Dostoievsky or Goncharoff, and yet conceivable by me because presented to me by a mind open at once to their skies and to mine. I read on, amused, moved, absorbed, till the tale and the journey ended together.

This, it seems to me, is the most striking quality of Mr. Gerhardie’s book: that he has (even in this, his first venture) enough of the true novelist’s

“objectivity” to focus the two so utterly alien races to which he belongs almost equally by birth and bringing-up—the English and Russian; to sympathize with both, and to depict them for us *as they see each other*, with the play of their mutual reactions illuminating and animating them all.

There are lots of other good things in the book; indeed, it is so surprisingly full of them that one wonders at the firmness of the hand which has held together all the fun, pathos and irony of the thronged sprawling tale, and guided it resolutely to an inevitable conclusion. “It takes genius to make an ending” Nietzsche said; and, perhaps partly for that reason, the modern novelist seems often to have decided that it is the trifle most conveniently dispensed with.

Mr. Gerhardie’s novel is extremely modern; but it has bulk and form, a recognizable orbit, and that promise of more to come which one always feels latent in the beginnings of the born novelist. For all these reasons—and most of all for the laughter, the tears, the strong beat of life in it—I should like to hand on my enjoyment of the book to as many other American readers as possible.

EDITH WHARTON.



FUTILITY

TO
KATHERINE MANSFIELD

PART I
THE THREE SISTERS

[The “I” of this book is not me.]

I

AND THEN IT STRUCK ME THAT THE ONLY THING TO do was to fit all this into a book. It is the classic way of treating life. For my ineffectual return to Vladivostok is the effectual conclusion of my theme. And the harbour has been strangely, knowingly responsive. It has sounded the note of departure, and the tall stone houses of the port seem to brood as I walk below, and “set the tone.” And because of this and the sense that I am marking time till the big steamer comes and bears me home to England I am eagerly retrospective.

...

When the *Simbirsk*, of the Russian Volunteer Fleet, had at last completely vanished, carrying away the three sisters to Shanghai, I came back to my room at the hotel. I had just moved in there. It was a bare and dingy room in a small and shabby hostel. A bed was eventually provided, but in lieu of bed-sheets I was to lie on a dirty table-cloth which was to serve again as table-cloth next morning when I had my breakfast. “Is this sheet clean?” I asked.

“Yes,” said the boy-attendant.

“Quite clean?”

“Quite.”

“Sure nobody slept on it?”

“Nobody. Only the boss.”

Big drops like tears fell on the window-pane and instantly made room for others. A ruined writing-table stood in the corner. I sat down. I fingered a typically Russian pen with a no less typically Russian nib, such as one is likely to encounter in almost any Russian government department, and dipping it repeatedly into ink that was like syrup, I made a bold beginning.

When night came I lay there on the table-cloth, hungry and worried by enormous hungry bugs that bit like dogs, and thought of Nina, Sonia, Vera, Nikolai Vasilievich and his unconventional family. In the morning the rain ceased.

I paced the country, now in the embrace of autumn. I wandered in remote places by the sea, in the abandoned park that used to be a park essentially for lovers, and thought of them. Here the foliage was more dense, the corners more secluded, the disorder more magnificent. I sat on an old bench that had names and initials cut out with a penknife, under the trees turning gold and auburn, and shivered in the sharp autumn wind that sent the fallen yellow leaves whirling down the alley. And the vast sea of Russian life seemed to be closing over me....

II

IT WAS SOMEWHAT IN THE MANNER OF AN IBSEN drama with retrospective revelations that I was initiated into the complicated affairs of the Bursanov family. I had been asked to call by the three sisters, all speaking simultaneously—a charming bouquet, the queen among whom I recognized only too well, and I called on them one evening in mid-summer at their *datcha*, at a sea-side place ten versts from Petersburg, a little bashful perhaps for I had not been invited by their elders; and I was met by the “bouquet” in the hall of the little wooden structure that hung out above the sea. They sprang out to me successively, introducing themselves in order of age.

“Sonia!”

“Nina!”

“Vera!”

They were then sixteen, fifteen and fourteen. I think I had told them that day when I had first spoken to them that I could not for the life of me distinguish one from the other, and had deliberately mixed up their names. It was, of course, poor fun, but they, then almost children, had seemed grateful for it and giggled, possibly for want of anything better.

I was led into a room full of people whose relationship I did not yet comprehend. By the presiding posture over the samovar I thought that I could recognize the mother, and I walked up to her, and she put me at my ease, talking Russian, I noticed, with an unmistakably German accent.

“You don’t any of you resemble your mother very much,” I told Nina afterwards.

“She is not our mother,” Nina said. “She is ... Fanny Ivanovna.”

I should not have thought that that youngish-looking, rather short but handsome man, well dressed but somewhat sluggish in his bearing, was their father, by the negligent, almost contemptuous manner in which his daughters treated him. But Nina called out “Papa!” and he turned round, and then I saw that she had his eyes, those steel-grey eyes softened by a charming, disquieting, sidelong look that was hers to give; and every now and then she would look straight into your eyes—anybody’s eyes—down into your very soul, bathing her soul in your soul, causing you to feel as though you were indeed “the only man who really mattered in the world.”

And Fanny Ivanovna pestered the life out of Nikolai Vasilievich (that was their father) by always asking silly questions, and Nikolai Vasilievich would look bored and sullen and would wave his hand at her as if she were a pestering fly and say:

“Drop it!”

Or he would imitate in an unkindly manner the preposterous way in which Fanny Ivanovna talked Russian. “*Elektrichno!* How often have I told you that it’s *elektrichestvo?*”

“It’s all the same,” said she.

Then the three sisters insisted on dancing the one-step and the hesitation-

waltz, at that time just coming into vogue abroad, while Nikolai Vasilievich was ordered to play some wretched tune on the piano over and over again. And I thought to myself: What a bouquet!

The ravishing experiment over, it was suggested at dinner that we should all go to the local theatre to see Chekhov's *Three Sisters*.

"Very well," said Fanny Ivanovna, "but Nikolai Vasilievich must come with us. That is the condition."

Nikolai Vasilievich frowned.

"You'll be too many in the box as it is."

"We can take two boxes," I suggested.

"There is no excuse, Nikolai," cried Fanny Ivanovna. And a dark shadow flitted across the handsome face of Nikolai Vasilievich. But still I did not understand.

It was not till the end of the second act of the *Three Sisters* that I had an inkling, my first intuition, that all was not well with the Bursanov family.

You know the manner of Chekhov's writing. You know the people in his plays. It seems as though they had all been born on the line of demarcation between comedy and tragedy—in a kind of No Man's Land. Fanny Ivanovna and the three sisters watched the play with intense interest, as if the *Three Sisters* were indeed their own particular tragedy. I sat behind Nina, and watched with that stupid scepticism that comes from too much happiness. To me, buoyant and impatient, the people in the play appeared preposterous. They annoyed me. They distressed me intensely. Their black melancholy, their incredible inefficiency, their paralysing inertia, crept over me. How different, I thought, were those three lovable creatures who sat in our box. How careless and free they were in their own happy home. The people in the play were hopeless.

"Good God!" I cried and grasped Nikolai Vasilievich by the arm as the curtain fell upon the second act. "How can there be such people, Nikolai Vasilievich? Think of it! They can't do what they want. They can't get where they want. They don't even know what they want. They talk, talk, talk, and then go off and commit suicide or something. It is a hysterical cry for greater efforts, for higher aims—which to themselves, mind you, are vague and unintelligible—and a perpetual standstill. It's like Faust in Gounod's opera who takes the hand of Marguerite in prison and cries, 'We flee! We flee!' while making no visible effort to quit the middle of the stage. Why can't people know what they want in life and get it? Why can't they, Nikolai Vasilievich?"

Nikolai Vasilievich sat still and silent and very sad. He shook his head gravely and his face darkened.

"It's all very well," he said slowly, "to *talk*. Life is not so simple. There are complications, so to speak, entanglements. It cuts all ways, till ... till you don't know where you are. Yes, Andrei Andreiech...." He sighed and paused before he spoke again.

"Chekhov," he said at last, "is a great artist...."

I walked home with them to their *datcha* along the dark and muddy road—it had been raining while we were in the theatre—Nina clinging to my arm.

III

IT WAS ON ONE OF THOSE LONG, HAPPY EVENINGS which it had now become my custom to spend regularly at their large, luxurious flat in the Mohovaya in St. Petersburg, that I was further initiated into the domestic affairs of the Bursanov family.

They had been sitting silently for a time. Nina seemed sad; Sonia and Vera sulky. It was twilight, but no one had thought of switching on the light. No one would dance. I played the piano for a while, and then stopped.

“What is the matter, Nina?” I asked.

She was silent, and then said in her childish open manner, “Oh, Papa and Fanny Ivanovna.”

“What have they done?”

“They are always quarrelling, always, always, always.”

I paused, hating to appear intrusive.

“You know,” she said in that half humorous, half serious way she had of speaking, and then paused a little, and then decided to have it out.

“Papa and Fanny Ivanovna are not ... legally married.”

“I know,” I said.

“How did you know?”

“I suspected it.”

“Did Vera tell you?”

“I didn’t!” cried Vera in loud protest. She was fourteen, but tried to look two years older, and indeed succeeded. “I’d never dream of telling such a thing.”

She was shocked and angry at the unjust accusation so provokingly flung at her. It had seemed to me for some time past that there was no love wasted between Vera and her two elder sisters. Vera was different.

“We can’t stand this any longer,” said Sonia. “I am sick to death of their quarrelling. Day and night, day and night... If they’d only stop at least when we have guests. But no, they are worse than ever then.”

I could bear her out there—that is, if I were really classed as a guest. For I was, rather, what Nikolai Vasilievich called “*svoy chelovek*,” one of the family, so to speak, and in my presence Nikolai Vasilievich and Fanny Ivanovna certainly let themselves go. They were like cat and dog. There was no mercy shown, no gallantry displayed. Nikolai Vasilievich gibed at her, imitating her murderous Russian with a malicious skill that set the room shrieking with laughter. Fanny Ivanovna, her white face flushing in patches of unwholesome

pink, would writhe with pain, and, having gathered her forces, give back as good as she got. Nikolai Vasilievich would snatch out some isolated word that she had mispronounced and, adding some pepper of his own, would fling it into the audience of friends and strangers that he had asked to dinner, and so pluck out the sting at her expense.

"I'm sick of home," Sonia said. "I shall run away."

"How can you run away?"

"I'll marry and run away."

"No one will marry her," said Vera from her perch in the far corner.

Nina sat mute, wearing her natural expression, half serious, half ironic.

"What do they quarrel about?"

Nina looked up at Sonia. "Shall I tell?"

"Of course."

"Aha!" Vera cried maliciously. "Aha!"

"You shut up!" said Sonia.

Nina looked vaguely at the window.

"Papa wants to marry again."

The rustle of Fanny Ivanovna's approach was heralded through the air.

She appeared.

"Andrei Andreiech!" she cried. She always greeted me in this way, with acclamation. "How d'you do!"

"How dark! Nina! Vera! Sonia! Why don't you light up the *elektrichno*!"

"How many times, Fanny Ivanovna," said Sonia sternly, "have I told you that it is not *elektrichno*, but *elektrichestvo*?"

"Ach! It's all the same."

"It's not all the same, Fanny Ivanovna."

"Andrei Andreiech! What news?"

"None, I am afraid, Fanny Ivanovna."

"Has Nikolai Vasilievich come?"

"You know he never comes," said Sonia, "and yet you always keep supper waiting."

"I'm tired of waiting for Papa," Nina said petulantly, lying back on the sofa and swinging her pretty legs.

"He is later and later every day," came from Vera's perch. "Fanny Ivanovna, I'm hungry."

Sonia was really angry. "I would rather he didn't come at all, than just come to sleep here. Let him stay there, Fanny Ivanovna. Let him!"

"Ach! I think he might still come if we waited a little longer. Are you very hungry, Andrei Andreiech?"

"Say yes! Say yes!" cried the three sisters. I was amazed at this open display of hostility towards their own father, especially from Sonia. I understood the look in Fanny Ivanovna's eyes.

"No, Fanny Ivanovna," I said, "not at all."

"Well, then we'll wait just a little longer. He *promised* to come."

There was a ring at the bell.

“It’s Nikolai Vasilievich!” cried Fanny Ivanovna.

But Nina shook her head. “Papa never rings so timidly. It must be Pàvel Pàvlovich.”

The three sisters sprang off their perches and dashed into the hall.

“Ah!” we heard Sonia’s voice.

“Who is it?... Kniaz?” shouted Fanny Ivanovna.

“No,” came the answer, “the other one.”

“Oh, the Baron. They are both Pàvel Pàvlovichi,” sighed Fanny Ivanovna as though the fact distressed her; but it was really because she disapproved of them both that she sighed.

Baron Wunderhausen as barons do in Russia, came from the Baltic Provinces, spoke Russian and German equally well, excelled in French, knew English, was polite, cunning and adaptable to any circumstances, had big calf’s eyes, was habitually somewhat over-dressed, twenty-five years of age, and had a billet in the Ministry for Foreign Affairs. He came regularly every evening, made love with his eyes, and we danced....

We danced, and then had supper, having given Nikolai Vasilievich up as we gave him up regularly every evening after waiting for him for two hours. His absence annoyed everybody, for they suspected where he was.

“I am going away,” said Nina as she danced with me.

“Going away? Where?”

“To Moscow,” she said, looking up. She had a wonderful way of looking up at you when she danced. She had a charming way of speaking quietly, enigmatically, half humorously, half lovingly.

“For always?” I cried in dismay.

In answer she held up two fingers behind my head which was supposed to give me the appearance of a horned devil, and laughed. I revelled in her laughter.

“For how long?” I asked.

“Two months.”

“Why?”

“To see Mama.”

“I didn’t know you had a Mama in Moscow.”

“I have,” she made the obvious answer and I smiled, and she laughed and again held up the devil’s horns.

“What is she doing in Moscow?” I asked, and felt it was a somewhat silly question.

“Living,” she replied. And it seemed to me that she blushed. And for some reason that blush seemed to tell me that there, too, there was trouble.

“Who are you going with?”

“Vera. She is going back for good. Mama wants to keep her.”

“Aren’t you sorry?”

“No.”

“Good God!” I cried.

“I am sorry to leave Sonia.”