The Pink Stocking

A gloomy, rainy day. The sky has been overcast with clouds for a long time, and there is no end to the rain in sight. Outside there is slush, puddles, and wet jackdaws, while inside the rooms there is twilight and such a chill that one might as well light the stoves.

Ivan Petrovich Somov paces his study from corner to corner, grumbling at the weather. The rain-tears on the windows and the gloom of the room fill him with melancholy. He is unbearably bored, and there is nothing to kill time with... The newspapers have not been delivered yet, there is no possibility of going hunting, and dinner is not for a long while yet...

Somov is not alone in his study. At his desk sits Mme Somova, a small, pretty little lady in a light blouse and pink stockings. She is diligently scribbling a letter. As he passes her, the pacing Ivan Petrovich every time peeks over her shoulder at the writing. He sees large, limping letters, narrow and thin, with impossible tails and squiggles. There are a multitude of blots, smudges, and fingerprints. Mme Somova does not like hyphenating, and each line of hers, upon reaching the edge of the sheet, falls downward in a waterfall with terrible contortions...

"Lidochka, who are you writing so much to?" asks Somov, seeing his wife begin to scribble on the sixth sheet.

"To sister Varya..."

"Hm... long! Let me read it to while away the boredom!"

"Take it, read it, only there's nothing interesting here..."

Somov takes the written sheets and, continuing to pace, begins to read. Lidochka leans back against the back of the armchair and watches the expression on his face. After the very first page, his face lengthens and expresses something akin to dismay... On the third page, Somov frowns and slowly scratches the back of his head. On the fourth, he stops, glances timidly at his wife, and falls into thought. After thinking a little, he sighs and again takes up the reading... His face expresses bewilderment and even fright...

"No, this is impossible!" he mutters, finishing the reading and flinging the sheets onto the table. "Decidedly impossible!"

"What is it?" Lidochka asks, frightened.

"What is it! You've filled six pages, spent a good two hours writing... and not a single thing in it! Not a single little thought! You read and read, and a kind of blackout comes over you, as if you were deciphering Chinese gibberish on tea chests! Oof!"

"Yes, that's true, Vanya..." says Lidochka, blushing. "I wrote carelessly..."

"What the devil do you mean, carelessly? In a careless letter there is sense and order, there is content, but yours... forgive me, I can't even find a name for it! Pure gibberish! Words and phrases, but not the slightest content. Your whole letter is exactly like the conversation of two little boys: 'We've got pancakes today!' 'A soldier came to us!' 'You're chewing bast!' You drag it out, you repeat yourself... Your little thoughts jump about like devils in a sieve: you can't make out where anything begins, where anything ends... Well, can one write like that?"

"If I had written with attention," Lidochka makes excuses, "then there wouldn't have been mistakes..."

"Oh, I'm not even talking about mistakes!" he cries. "Poor grammar is screaming! Every single line is a personal insult to it! No commas, no periods, and the yat... brrr! Zemlya is written not with a yat, but with an e! And the handwriting? That's not handwriting, that's despair! I'm not joking, Lida... This letter of yours both amazed and struck me... Don't be angry, my dear, but, by God, I didn't think you were such a cobbler at grammar... And yet by your position you belong to the educated, intelligent circle, you are the wife of a university man, the daughter of a general! Tell me, did you study anywhere?"

"But of course! I finished at the von Mebke boarding school..."

Somov shrugs his shoulders and, sighing, continues to pace. Lidochka, aware of her ignorance and ashamed, also sighs and casts down her eyes... About ten minutes pass in silence...

"Listen, Lidochka, this is, in essence, terrible!" says Somov, suddenly stopping in front of his wife and looking at her face with horror. "After all, you are a mother... do you understand? A mother! How will you teach the children if you know nothing yourself? You have a good brain, but what's the use of it if it hasn't assimilated even elementary knowledge? Well, to hell with knowledge... the children will get knowledge at school too, but you're lame in the moral department as well! Sometimes you blurt out such things that your ears wilt!"

Somov again shrugs his shoulders, wraps the skirts of his dressing gown around him, and continues to pace... He is both annoyed and hurt, and at the same time he feels sorry for Lidochka, who does not protest, but only blinks her eyes... It is hard

and bitter for them both... Neither of them notices, in their grief, how the time flies and the hour of dinner approaches...

Sitting down to dinner, Somov, who likes to eat well and in peace, drinks a large glass of vodka and begins a conversation on another topic. Lidochka listens to him, agrees with him, but suddenly, during the soup, her eyes fill with tears, and she begins to whimper.

"It's mother's fault!" she says, wiping her tears with a napkin. "Everyone advised her to send me to the gymnasium, and from the gymnasium I would certainly have gone on to the courses!"

"To the courses... to the gymnasium..." mutters Somov. "That's going to extremes, my dear! What's so good about being a blue stocking? A blue stocking... the devil knows what! Neither a woman nor a man, but just a half-and-half, neither fish nor fowl... I hate blue stockings! I would never have married a learned woman..."

"One can't make you out..." says Lidochka. "You're angry that I'm uneducated, and at the same time you hate learned women; you're offended that there are no thoughts in my letter, but you yourself are against my studying..."

"You're quibbling over a phrase, my dear," Somov yawns, pouring himself a second glass out of boredom...

Under the influence of the vodka he has drunk and the hearty dinner, Somov becomes merrier, kinder, and softer... He watches his pretty wife with her worried face preparing a salad, and a surge of woman-love, condescension, and all-forgiveness sweeps over him...

"I needlessly disconcerted the poor little thing today..." he thinks. "Why did I say so many wretched things to her? She is, it's true, my little fool, uncivilized, narrow, but... after all, a medal has two sides and audiatur et altera pars... Perhaps those who say that a woman's lack of reflection is founded on her feminine calling are right a thousand times over... Her calling, let us suppose, is to love her husband, bear children, and cut up salad, so what the devil does she need knowledge for? Of course!"

He recalls at this how difficult clever women are in general, how demanding, strict, and uncompromising they are, and how, on the contrary, it is easy to live with the little fool Lidochka, who pokes her nose into nothing, understands little, and does not come at you with criticism. With Lidochka it is peaceful, and you don't risk running into an audit...

"To hell with them, these clever and learned women! It's better and calmer living with simple ones," he thinks, taking from Lidochka a plate with a chicken on it...

He recalls that a civilized man sometimes feels the desire to chat and share his thoughts with a clever and learned woman...

"Well?" thinks Somov. "If I feel like a chat about something clever, I'll go to Natalya Andreyevna... or to Marya Frantsevna... Very simple!"

let the other side also be heard... (Latin).