## Love and Russian Literature

W. Somerset Maugham

When Ashenden found himself in his bedroom at the hotel and, for the first time for it seemed an age, alone he sat down and looked about him. He had not the energy to start immediately to unpack. How many of these hotel bedrooms had he known since the beginning of the war, grand or shabby, in one place and one land after another! It seemed to him that he had been living in his luggage for as long as he could remember. He was weary. He asked himself how he was going to set about the work that he had been sent to do. He felt lost in the immensity of Russia and very solitary. He had protested when he was chosen for this mission, it looked too large an order, but his protests were ignored. He was chosen not because those in authority thought him particularly suited for the job, but because there was no one to be found who was more suited. There was a knock at the door and Ashenden, pleased to make use of the few words of the language he knew, called out in Russian. The door was opened. He sprang to his feet.

‘Come in, come in,’ he cried. ‘I’m awfully glad to see you.’

Three men entered. He knew them by sight, since they had travelled on the same boat with him from San Francisco to Yokohama, but following their instructions no communications had passed between them and Ashenden. They were Czechs, exiled from their country for their revolutionary activity and long settled in America, who had been sent over to Russia to help Ashenden in his mission and put him in touch with Professor Z. whose authority over the Czechs in Russia was absolute. Their chief was a certain Dr. Egon Orth, a tall thin man, with a little grey head; he was minister to some church in the Middle West and a doctor of divinity; but had abandoned his cure to work for the liberation of his country, and Ashenden had the impression that he was an intelligent fellow who would not put too fine a point on matters of conscience. A parson with a fixed idea has this advantage over common men, that he can persuade himself of the Almighty’s approval for almost any goings on. Dr. Orth had a merry twinkle in his eye and a dry humour.

Ashenden had had two secret interviews with him in Yokohama and had learnt that Professor Z., though eager to free his country from the Austrian rule and since he knew that this could only come about by the downfall of the Central Powers with the allies body and soul, yet had scruples; he would not do things that outraged his conscience, all must be straightforward and above board, and so some things that it was necessary to do had to be done without his knowledge. His influence was so great that his wishes could not be disregarded, but on occasion it was felt better not to let him know too much of what was going on.

Dr. Orth had arrived in Petrograd a week before Ashenden and now put before him what he had learned of the situation. It seemed to Ashenden that it was critical and if anything was to be done it must be done quickly. The army was dissatisfied and mutinous, the Government under the weak Kerensky was tottering and held power only because no one else had the courage to seize it, famine was staring the country in the face and already the possibility had to be considered that the Germans would march on Petrograd. The ambassadors of Great Britain and the United States had been apprised of Ashenden’s coming, but his mission was secret even from them, and there were particular reasons why he could demand no assistance from them. He arranged with Dr. Orth to make an appointment with Professor Z. so that he could learn his views and explain to him that he had the financial means to support any scheme that seemed likely to prevent the catastrophe that the Allied governments foresaw of Russia’s making a separate peace. But he had to get in touch with influential persons in all classes. Mr. Harrington with his business proposition and his letters to Ministers of State would be thrown in contact with members of the Government and Mr. Harrington wanted an interpreter. Dr. Orth spoke Russian almost as well as his own language and it struck Ashenden that he would be admirably suited to the post. He explained the circumstances to him and it was arranged that while Ashenden and Mr. Harrington were at luncheon Dr. Orth should come in, greeting Ashenden as though he had not seen him before, and be introduced to Mr. Harrington; then Ashenden, guiding the conversation, would suggest to Mr. Harrington that the heavens had sent in Dr. Orth the ideal man for his purpose.

But there was another person on whom Ashenden had fixed as possibly useful to him and now he said:

‘Have you ever heard of a woman called Anastasia Alexandrovna Leonidov? She’s the daughter of Alexander Denisiev.’

‘I know all about him of course.’

‘I have reason to believe she’s in Petrograd. Will you find out where she lives and what she’s doing?’

‘Certainly.’

Dr. Orth spoke in Czech to one of the two men who accompanied him. They were sharp-looking fellows, both of them, one was tall and fair and the other was short and dark, but they were younger than Dr. Orth and Ashenden understood that they were there to do as he bade them. The man nodded, got up, shook hands with Ashenden and went out.

‘You shall have all the information possible this afternoon.’

‘Well, I think there’s nothing more we can do for the present,’ said Ashenden. ‘To tell you the truth I haven’t had a bath for eleven days and I badly want one.’

Ashenden had never quite made up his mind whether the pleasure of reflection was better pursued in a railway carriage or in a bath. So far as the act of invention was concerned he was inclined to prefer a train that went smoothly and not too fast, and many of his best ideas had come to him when he was thus traversing the plains of France; but for the delight of reminiscence or the entertainment of embroidery upon a theme already in his head he had no doubt that nothing could compare with a hot bath. He considered now, wallowing in soapy water like a water-buffalo in a muddy pond, the grim pleasantry of his relations with Anastasia Alexandrovna Leonidov.

In these stories no more than the barest suggestion has been made that Ashenden was capable on occasions of the passion ironically called tender. The specialists in this matter, those charming creatures who make a business of what philosophers know is but a diversion, assert that writers, painters and musicians, all in short who are connected with the arts, in the relation of love, cut no very conspicuous figure. There is much cry but little wool. They rave or sigh, make phrases and strike many a romantic attitude, but in the end, loving art or themselves (which with them is one and the same thing) better than the object of their emotion, offer a shadow when the said object, with the practical common sense of the sex, demands a substance. It may be so and this may be the reason (never before suggested) why women in their souls look upon art with such a virulent hatred. Be this as it may Ashenden in the last twenty years had felt his heart go pit-a-pat because of one charming person after another. He had had a good deal of fun and had paid for it with a great deal of misery, but even when suffering most acutely from the pangs of unrequited love he had been able to say to himself, albeit with a wry face, after all, it’s grist to the mill.

Anastasia Alexandrovna Leonidov was the daughter of a revolutionary who had escaped from Siberia after being sentenced to penal servitude for life and had settled in England. He was an able man and had supported himself for thirty years by the activity of a restless pen and had even made himself a distinguished position in English letters. When Anastasia Alexandrovna reached a suitable age she married Vladimir Semenovich Leonidov, also an exile from his native country, and it was after she had been married to him for some years that Ashenden made her acquaintance. It was at the time when Europe discovered Russia. Everyone was reading the Russian novelists, the Russian dancers captivated the civilised world, and the Russian composers set shivering the sensibility of persons who were beginning to want a change from Wagner. Russian art seized upon Europe with the virulence of an epidemic of influenza. New phrases became the fashion, new colours, new emotions, and the highbrows described themselves without a moment’s hesitation as members of the intelligentsia. It was a difficult word to spell but an easy one to say.

Ashenden fell like the rest, changed the cushions of his sitting-room, hung an eikon on the wall, read Chekov and went to the ballet.

Anastasia Alexandrovna was by birth, circumstances and education very much a member of the intelligentsia. She lived with her husband in a tiny house near Regent’s Park and here all the literary folk in London might gaze with humble reverence at pale-faced bearded giants who leaned against the wall like caryatids taking a day off; they were revolutionaries to a man and it was a miracle that they were not in the mines of Siberia. Women of letters tremulously put their lips to a glass of vodka. If you were lucky and greatly favoured you might shake hands there with Diaghileff and now and again, like a peach-blossom wafted by the breeze, Pavlova herself hovered in and out. At this time Ashenden’s success had not been so great as to affront the highbrows, he had very distinctly been one of them in his youth, and though some already looked askance, others (optimistic creatures with a faith in human nature) still had hopes of him. Anastasia Alexandrovna told him to his face that he was a member of the intelligentsia. Ashenden was quite ready to believe it. He was in a state when he was ready to believe anything. He was thrilled and excited. It seemed to him that at last he was about to capture that illusive spirit of romance that he had so long been chasing. Anastasia Alexandrovna had fine eyes and a good, though for these days, too voluptuous figure, high cheek-bones and a snub nose (this was very Tartar), a wide mouth full of large square teeth and a pale skin. She dressed somewhat flamboyantly. In her dark melancholy eyes Ashenden saw the boundless steppes of Russia, and the Kremlin with its pealing bells, and the solemn ceremonies of Easter at St. Isaac’s, and forests of silver beeches and the Nevsky Prospekt; it was astonishing how much he saw in her eyes. They were round and shining and slightly protuberant like those of a Pekinese. They talked together of Alyosha in the Brothers Karamazov, of Natasha in War and Peace, of Anna Karenina and of Fathers and Sons.

Ashenden soon discovered that her husband was quite unworthy of her and presently learned that she shared his opinion. Vladimir Semenovich was a little man with a large, long head that looked as though it had been pulled like a piece of liquorice, and he had a great shock of unruly Russian hair. He was a gentle, unobtrusive creature and it was hard to believe that the Czarist government had really feared his revolutionary activities. He taught Russian and wrote for papers in Moscow. He was amiable and obliging. He needed these qualities, for Anastasia Alexandrovna was a woman of character: when she had a toothache Vladimir Semenovich suffered the agonies of the damned and when her heart was wrung by the suffering of her unhappy country Vladimir Semenovich might well have wished he had never been born. Ashenden could not help admitting that he was a poor thing, but he was so harmless that he conceived quite a liking for him, and when in due course he had disclosed his passion to Anastasia Alexandrovna and to his joy found it was returned he was puzzled to know what to do about Vladimir Semenovich. Neither Anastasia Alexandrovna nor he felt that they could live another minute out of one another’s pockets, and Ashenden feared that with her revolutionary views and all that she would never consent to marry him; but somewhat to his surprise, and very much to his relief, she accepted the suggestion with alacrity.

‘Would Vladimir Semenovich let himself be divorced, do you think?’ he asked, as he sat on the sofa, leaning against cushions the colour of which reminded him of raw meat just gone bad, and held her hand.

‘Vladimir adores me,’ she answered. ‘It’ll break his heart.’

‘He’s a nice fellow, I shouldn’t like him to be very unhappy. I hope he’ll get over it.’

‘He’ll never get over it. That is the Russian spirit. I know that when I leave him he’ll feel that he has lost everything that made life worth living for him. I’ve never known anyone so wrapped up in a woman as he is in me. But of course he wouldn’t want to stand in the way of my happiness. He’s far too great for that. He’ll see that when it’s a question of my own self-development I haven’t the right to hesitate. Vladimir will give me my freedom without question.’

At that time the divorce law in England was even more complicated and absurd than it is now and in case she was not acquainted with its peculiarities Ashenden explained to Anastasia Alexandrovna the difficulties of the case. She put her hand gently on his.

‘Vladimir would never expose me to the vulgar notoriety of the divorce court. When I tell him that I have decided to marry you he will commit suicide.’

‘That would be terrible,’ said Ashenden.

He was startled, but thrilled. It was really very much like a Russian novel and he saw the moving and terrible pages, pages and pages, in which Dostoievsky would have described the situation. He knew the lacerations his characters would have suffered, the broken bottles of champagne, the visits to the gipsies, the vodka, the swoonings, the catalepsy and the long, long speeches everyone would have made. It was all very dreadful and wonderful and shattering.

‘It would make us horribly unhappy,’ said Anastasia Alexandrovna, ‘but I don’t know what else he could do. I couldn’t ask him to live without me. He would be like a ship without a rudder or a car without a carburettor. I know Vladimir so well. He will commit suicide.’

‘How?’ asked Ashenden, who had the realist’s passion for the exact detail.

‘He will blow his brains out.’

Ashenden remembered Rosmerholm. In his day he had been an ardent Ibsenite and had even flirted with the notion of learning Norwegian so that he might, by reading the master in the original, get at the secret essence of his thought. He had once seen Ibsen in the flesh drink a glass of Munich beer.

‘But do you think we could ever pass another easy hour if we had the death of that man on our conscience?’ he asked. ‘I have a feeling that he would always be between us.’

‘I know we shall suffer, we shall suffer dreadfully,’ said Anastasia Alexandrovna, ‘but how can we help it? Life is like that. We must think of Vladimir. There is his happiness to be considered too. He will prefer to commit suicide.’

She turned her face away and Ashenden saw that the heavy tears were coursing down her cheeks. He was much moved. For he had a soft heart and it was dreadful to think of poor Vladimir lying there with a bullet in his brain.

These Russians, what fun they have!

But when Anastasia Alexandrovna had mastered her emotion she turned to him gravely. She looked at him with her humid, round and slightly protuberant eyes.

‘We must be quite sure that we’re doing the right thing,’ she said. ‘I should never forgive myself if I’d allowed Vladimir to commit suicide and then found I’d made a mistake. I think we ought to make sure that we really love one another.’

‘But don’t you know?’ exclaimed Ashenden in a low, tense voice. ‘I know.’

‘Let’s go over to Paris for a week and see how we get on. Then we shall know.’

Ashenden was a trifle conventional and the suggestion took him by surprise. But only for a moment. Anastasia was wonderful. She was very quick and she saw the hesitation that for an instant troubled him.

‘Surely you have no bourgeois prejudices?’ she said.

‘Of course not,’ he assured her hurriedly, for he would much sooner have been thought knavish than bourgeois. ‘I think it’s a splendid idea.’

‘Why should a woman hazard her whole life on a throw? It’s impossible to know what a man is really like till you’ve lived with him. It’s only fair to give her the opportunity to change her mind before it’s too late.’

‘Quite so,’ said Ashenden.

Anastasia Alexandrovna was not a woman to let the grass grow under her feet and so having made their arrangements forthwith on the following Saturday they started for Paris.

‘I shall not tell Vladimir that I am going with you,’ she said. ‘It would only distress him.’

‘It would be a pity to do that,’ said Ashenden.

‘And if at the end of the week I come to the conclusion that we’ve made a mistake he need never know anything about it.’

‘Quite so,’ said Ashenden.

They met at Victoria Station.

‘What class have you got?’ she asked him.

‘First.’

‘I’m glad of that. Father and Vladimir travel third on account of their principles, but I always feel sick on a train and I like to be able to lean my head on somebody’s shoulder. It’s easier in a first-class carriage.’

When the train started Anastasia Alexandrovna said she felt dizzy, so she took off her hat and leaned her head on Ashenden’s shoulder. He put his arm round her waist.

‘Keep quite still, won’t you?’ she said.

When they got on to the boat she went down to the ladies’ cabin and at Calais was able to eat a very hearty meal, but when they got into the train she took off her hat again and rested her head on Ashenden’s shoulder. He thought he would like to read and took up a book.

‘Do you mind not reading?’ she said. ‘I have to be held and when you turn the pages it makes me feel all funny.’

Finally they reached Paris and went to a little hotel on the Left Bank that Anastasia Alexandrovna knew of. She said it had atmosphere. She could not bear those great big grand hotels on the other side; they were hopelessly vulgar and bourgeois.

‘I’ll go anywhere you like,’ said Ashenden, ‘as long as there’s a bathroom.’

She smiled and pinched his cheek.

‘How adorably English you are. Can’t you do without a bathroom for a week? My dear, my dear, you have so much to learn.’

They talked far into the night about Maxim Gorki and Karl Marx, human destiny, love and the brotherhood of man; and drank innumerable cups of Russian tea, so that in the morning Ashenden would willingly have breakfasted in bed and got up for luncheon; but Anastasia Alexandrovna was an early riser. When life was so short and there was so much to do it was a sinful thing to have breakfast a minute after half-past eight. They sat down in a dingy little dining-room the windows of which showed no signs of having been opened for a month. It was full of atmosphere. Ashenden asked Anastasia Alexandrovna what she would have for breakfast.

‘Scrambled eggs,’ she said.

She ate heartily. Ashenden had already noticed that she had a healthy appetite. He supposed it was a Russian trait; you could not picture Anna Karenina making her midday meal off a bath-bun and a cup of coffee, could you?

After breakfast they went to the Louvre and in the afternoon they went to the Luxembourg. They dined early in order to go to the Comédie Française; then they went to a Russian cabaret where they danced. When next morning at eight-thirty they took their places in the dining-room and Ashenden asked Anastasia Alexandrovna what she fancied, her reply was:

‘Scrambled eggs.’

‘But we had scrambled eggs yesterday,’ he expostulated.

‘Let’s have them again to-day,’ she smiled.

‘All right.’

They spent the day in the same manner except that they went to the Carnavalet instead of the Louvre and the Musée Guimet instead of the Luxembourg. But when the morning after in answer to Ashenden’s enquiry Anastasia Alexandrovna again asked for scrambled eggs, his heart sank.

‘But we had scrambled eggs yesterday and the day before,’ he said.

‘Don’t you think that’s a very good reason to have them again to-day?’

‘No, I don’t.’

‘Is it possible that your sense of humour is a little deficient this morning?’ she asked. ‘I eat scrambled eggs every day. It’s the only way I like them.’

‘Oh, very well. In that case of course we’ll have scrambled eggs.’

But the following morning he could not face them.

‘Will you have scrambled eggs as usual?’ he asked her.

‘Of course,’ she smiled affectionately, showing him two rows of large square teeth.

‘All right, I’ll order them for you; I shall have mine fried.’

The smile vanished from her lips.

‘Oh?’ She paused a moment. ‘Don’t you think that’s rather inconsiderate? Do you think it’s fair to give the cook unnecessary work? You English, you’re all the same, you look upon servants as machines. Does it occur to you that they have hearts like yours, the same feelings and the same emotions? How can you be surprised that the proletariat are seething with discontent when the bourgeoisie like you are so monstrously selfish?’

‘Do you really think that there’ll be a revolution in England if I have my eggs in Paris fried rather than scrambled?’

She tossed her pretty head in indignation.

‘You don’t understand. It’s the principle of the thing. You think it’s a jest, of course I know you’re being funny, I can laugh at a joke as well as anyone, Chekov was well-known in Russia as a humorist; but don’t you see what is involved? Your whole attitude is wrong. It’s a lack of feeling. You wouldn’t talk like that if you had been through the events of 1905 in Petersburg. When I think of the crowds in front of the Winter Palace kneeling in the snow while the Cossacks charged them, women and children! No, no, no.’

Her eyes filled with tears and her face was all twisted with pain. She took Ashenden’s hand.

‘I know you have a good heart. It was just thoughtless on your part and we won’t say anything more about it. You have imagination. You’re very sensitive. I know. You’ll have your eggs done in the same way as mine, won’t you?’

‘Of course,’ said Ashenden.

He ate scrambled eggs for breakfast every morning after that. The waiter said: ‘Monsieur aime les aufs brouillés.’ At the end of the week they returned to London. He held Anastasia Alexandrovna in his arms, her head resting on his shoulder, from Paris to Calais and again from Dover to London. He reflected that the journey from New York to San Francisco took five days. When they arrived at Victoria and stood on the platform waiting for a cab she looked at him with her round, shining and slightly protuberant eyes.

‘We’ve had a wonderful time, haven’t we?’ she said.

‘Wonderful.’

‘I’ve quite made up my mind. The experiment has justified itself. I’m willing to marry you whenever you like.’

But Ashenden saw himself eating scrambled eggs every morning for the rest of his life. When he had put her in a cab, he called another for himself, went to the Cunard office and took a berth on the first ship that was going to America. No immigrant, eager for freedom and a new life, ever looked upon the statue of Liberty with more heartfelt thankfulness than did Ashenden, when on that bright and sunny morning his ship steamed into the harbour of New York.