

# Higher Education

## I

In every group of people there's always that someone who is universally well regarded, with a good reputation, loved by everyone, someone about whom only good things are said and who never seems to have a bad word to say about anyone. In her circle of classmates that person was Lyuba Isakovna Fidler.

Barely a conversation went by without someone referring to her as a “wonderful person!”

Despite her melancholic inclinations—which one noticed in her eager eyes and the sad brevity of her smiles—she was generally in good spirits and ready to take an interest in other people's troubles. She rarely complained. One might think she was the happiest of all her friends, those lost souls who lived a life of dissatisfaction, boredom, and want.

She was a tall, brown-haired girl of about twenty-two with a thin, nimble figure, a pale, somewhat oblong, noble face, and sad, clear eyes. It would be difficult to say that she was extraordinarily beautiful. She was one of those women who are best appreciated by the eye of an artist or a lover, uncovering the harmony and subtle beauty of her features. In the two years since she had moved to Warsaw to study midwifery no one had fallen in love with her, no one had noticed her, and she herself had given up believing that her beauty could please anyone.

A few years ago at *gymnazium* in her hometown in the south of Russia, she had been considered a beauty. She had loved to dress well,

and nothing gave her more pleasure than putting on a new, nicely tailored white blouse.

She had been used to receiving favors and infatuated glances and being the best liked. But that was then. Now she was different: appealing for other reasons and in an entirely new way.

She was no better or worse off than any of her friends. Her parents sent her twenty rubles every month—just barely enough for a small attic room on the fourth floor (which she shared with a classmate) and sufficient food to keep hunger at bay. But the twenty rubles didn't always come on time. She knew it wasn't easy for her parents to spare the money, and she felt guilty. Her life consisted of studying, working in the hospital, and reading—mostly clandestine political pamphlets. All that awaited her at the end of the day was a cramped room with slanted walls and a window that opened onto the roof, tea boiled on the stove, and her dear friend Maria Kratova, a Russian from the Moscow region, daughter of a priest. Kratova was a sturdy, well-built creature, good-natured and beautiful, with friendly eyes and timid, sedate movements. She was shy and quiet and very fond of Fidler, but her fondness was more often expressed in a smile or a gesture than in words.

One evening the two girls sat together in their room as the short winter's day was drawing to a close. Darkness was creeping into the narrow room, and the corners were already completely in shadow. They had run out of oil for the lamp and were quietly waiting for a friend who was coming to lend them money for more. Fidler sat by the window, straining her eyes to continue reading her book. Kratova started to stroke Fidler's long hair, braiding and unbraiding it, something that in the full light of day she would not have felt comfortable doing. Fidler continued to read, her eyes battling the ever-expanding darkness.

"Enough reading already; you'll ruin your eyes," said Kratova, her wide smile and gentle face just about visible in the darkness. Fidler stood up, tidied her hair, and picked up a bottle to go find some oil. The friends looked at each other with a smile.

“What do you think, will the shopkeeper let us borrow some oil? I’m going to try.”

“That swine won’t give you anything,” said Kratova. “Don’t waste your time. Sit down instead.”

The friends sat in the dark, talking openly. Fidler fantasized about her future. Her voice was even softer than usual:

“When I graduate I’m going to apply to work for the *zemstvo*. I’ll live in a village somewhere, healing people, being useful in any way I can. I’ll spread propaganda. That, my dear, will be a true life, not like here where you could simply die of boredom.

“And you won’t get married?” asked Kratova gently.

Fidler thought about it and said: “Yes, why not get married? If I happen to find someone according to my tastes who would be willing to work with me in a village, why not? It’s unlikely I’ll ever get married though; I’m no beauty, after all. No one is going to fall in love with me, and without love I’ll never marry.”

“No, you *are* beautiful, I swear it! You’re a beauty!”

“You lying scoundrel!” said Fidler, and with that they both burst out laughing.

Such conversations could stretch on for hours, until one of their acquaintances would come and lend them some small change. Now there was light in the room, and for the two friends it seemed as if they had just been living through some sort of dream. They exchanged glances with a smile. Tea was made, soon more acquaintances arrived, everyone spoke, argued, laughed, sang songs, and there was noise and laughter. But Fidler, the most beloved of all, remained strangely subdued and kept herself at a remove. She listened to the conversations but had trouble joining in. She found it curious and irksome to hear such free and easy talk about subjects that she felt were profoundly important, but that she had so few words to describe.

“I’m no hero,” she often thought to herself. “I have neither talent nor understanding, but I’ll do everything I can to finish my studies and find work in a village.”

It had not taken her long to convince herself that she was no hero.

## II

Fidler came home from the opera late one night, fired up and invigorated. She found her friend wrapped up in a blanket, sleepy-eyed and shivering with cold. Fidler lit the lamp, loosened the ribbon around her waist, and started excitedly telling Kratova all about the performance she had seen. She had brought her good mood home with her and did not feel like letting go of it just yet. Her ears were still ringing with the sound of the music, her head was still spinning from the colorful images, whereas in her room it was just so dreary and dark.

"I met a young man at the opera this evening," she told her drowsy friend, "a strange bourgeois with a gold watch, a bit of a dandy. He was quite gallant, I assure you! He offered me his seat and paid me so many compliments; oh, how pathetic it was! Batistini sang so divinely, and there I was, sitting like a lady, with my cavalier standing behind in a corner."

All she wanted to do was talk, but Kratova was tired. Fidler fell silent and retreated into her thoughts. Through some wondrous association she was reminded of the old days when she was a schoolgirl. The merry flickering and crackling of the torches as the orchestra played; how she glided so happily, how loudly she laughed, and how people whispered compliments in her ear . . . her mind overflowed with excitement.

Soon the two friends were in the bed that they shared.

"You know what, Maria?" Fidler said, waking her friend up. "He's actually quite well educated, a doctor."

She had just remembered that he had introduced himself as Dr. Vaynshteyn.

"Who are you talking about?" asked Kratova, half asleep.

"My cavalier, of course, the one who let me have his seat. Are you asleep?"

"Yes, my love, let me sleep."

A carriage drove by on the street, causing the windowpanes to tremble. The bell rang at the gate below.

“Shhh!” There were footsteps. Was someone coming to search the house and have them arrested?

“What sort of thoughts are creeping into my head today!” she chided herself.

It was normal that the opera excited her. It was her usual release from mundane routine. But today there was also a new feeling: the young man, the compliments, the fact that someone liked her . . .

And still, the following day she did not feel as though she had returned to the humdrum. It was not like before.

But what use are the dreams that pass through the minds of the lonely, disappearing just as quickly as they arrive? Fidler would have already forgotten about the whole story had she not—as she was walking through the streets one day at her usual fast pace—happened to see that very same “dandy and cavalier,” Dr. Vaynshteyn. He was a man in his early thirties, with an intelligent, yet somewhat dull, face, and a thick, blond mustache. On either side of his face were two deep creases near his mouth, with other smaller wrinkles around his large, clear eyes.

He was strolling deliberately down the street. They both stopped reluctantly, smiling at each other. He was pleased to run into her, and when he asked where she was going and learned that she was on her way home, he offered to accompany her.

“But don’t hurry; I don’t like to rush,” he said.

Like all young people, Fidler had a lot of questions, and Dr. Vaynshteyn was glad to answer them. She discovered that he was the son of very rich parents who lived out in the country in a village in the Kovno region. Dr. Vaynshteyn told her he’d lived abroad for many years, working as a medical doctor, but that he no longer practiced medicine: for the time being he was “just living” here in Warsaw. He pronounced these words with a half smile, in which there lay some self-deprecating irony. Fidler looked at him in puzzlement and asked: “What do you do here then?”

“It’s hard to say. Nothing.”

“Nothing?”

“Nothing,” he answered with the same smile. “Does that surprise you? I’m rich; I mean to say: I have rich parents. Necessity does not

drive to me work, nor does any inner desire, for that matter. I'm a professional bourgeois," he joked.

"But isn't that a little tiresome?"

"A little tiresome, yes."

When they reached her door, he thought for a moment and said:

"I would like to meet you more often, if I may."

"What for?" she asked, a little curious, a little flirtatious, looking straight into his face with her wide, sad eyes.

"Only to keep boredom at bay. No, really," he added in a serious tone, "I'm a stranger here in Warsaw, I have practically no intelligent friends, and it would be my pleasure to meet up with you."

Despite his "untalented nature" (he described himself as someone who was of no use to others and lived without any enjoyment on his part), Vaynshteyn had one great virtue, which sometimes made him very likeable: when he wanted to, he could be serious, childishly earnest, and openhearted. In those moments his tone lost its characteristic irony, and his facial expressions also became different. He had uttered those last words to Fidler in this serious tone, and in that moment Fidler liked him.

"It's possible," she replied. "If you want, come up to my place, but I'll be honest with you, I'm not sure you'll like my room. You being a bourgeois and all."

"Oh, don't talk nonsense."

But in her room their conversation floundered. He told her about his student days abroad and made jokes about how cramped and dark the room was—he found that crooked walls were more interesting, because they were richer in lines and corners. But his jokes fell flat, and as soon as Kratovka came home he said his goodbyes and left.

"You know," Fidler told Kratovka, "that's the same doctor I met at the opera. A very interesting, cultivated man."

"A social revolutionary?"

"No. He doesn't seem to do anything in particular, but he's still interesting. He's bored and is looking for companionship with intelligent people."

Kratova seemed skeptical.

“What?” asked Fidler. “What don’t you understand?”

“Let’s hope he’s not a spy, at least.”

“Oh shut up! You don’t even know him.”

And with that Fidler brought the conversation to a close.

A few days later she received a ticket along with a letter from Dr. Vaynshteyn inviting her to join him to see an opera by Wagner.

“You’re very kind,” she said somewhat ironically. “I wanted to see Wagner so badly. It’s terrible how much I love him! And to tell the truth I didn’t have any money. You came to my rescue; thank you!”

Out of the whole monologue, the final “thank you” came out so freely and naturally that they both felt at ease.

What a joyous evening it was! Normally when she went to the opera her seat was on the top balcony, where she was forced to stand most of the time, keeping her balance so as not to fall. It was in such a pose that she had first caught the attention of Dr. Vaynshteyn. She had been standing on her seat, holding on to a pole for balance, and her bent, slender figure had possessed a particular charm.

Now she sat by the stage, free, undisturbed. And Vaynshteyn seemed more affable than before. He sat calmly, a somewhat austere expression on his face, and there she noticed for the first time a deep, old sadness, a sadness so entwined with him it seemed as though he could not have been created without it.

Later they went to a café. As always after the opera, Fidler was in an energetic, happy mood. She felt that there was still so much brightness, so much splendor in the world.

“How pleasant it is to have money!” she thought. Her eyes sparkled, her light, agile body looked even fresher, more graceful. She noticed how glances came at her from all directions. Dr. Vaynshteyn, on the other hand, sat with a weary expression, seemingly exhausted.

“You have no idea what sort of milieu I grew up in, and still live in,” he suddenly began, as if seeking to justify his sadness to her.

“Our Jewish bourgeoisie—that’s the worst you could possibly imagine: crude, depraved, godless, tasteless, without style, without traditions, without a future. Only one thing matters to them, only one pursuit interests them, and that’s money. Imagine, I spent eight

years abroad, living by my own means. I observed life around me, I studied, read, and developed myself; in short, I strived to become what we call ‘cultivated.’ Now it turns out that this is not a virtue but a vice! Naturally, the fact that I have a medical degree pleases my family—not that it has any practical use, not for me and not for others—but they can’t stand my philosophy and look on me as a low-life, an idler.

“They can only think of one way to save me: marriage. It’s laughable, but it causes me such pain. All my aunts feel duty-bound to make me happy and find me a potential bride. They practically never leave me alone.

“It’s become so intolerable that I’ve stopped visiting them altogether, which caused a scandal. My father is angry, my mother sends me tear-stained letters, my aunts pester me constantly . . . I have no other choice, it seems, than to go abroad again.”

He finished his long monologue and gazed at her searchingly.

Clearly he himself didn’t understand why he was telling her all this.

“There are so few happy people in this world,” he concluded, “and I’m jealous of those who have some sort of goal, who can forget about themselves. They feel good; they have no worries and only think about others, and that’s it.”

Fidler sighed, glad that he had finished.

Dr. Vaynshteyn changed the subject, managing to leave the uncomfortable conversation behind, and they stayed in the café a while longer, talking about opera, Warsaw, and other uncomplicated things. It was already very late by the time he brought her home, and as he was saying goodbye he held her hand tightly.

“Are you going abroad soon?” she asked.

“Not yet. Not so soon,” he answered, and the sad weariness of his face was hidden by an affable smile.