

V. MY ELDER BROTHER

I was only a year and some odd months younger than Woloda, and from the first we had grown up and studied and played together. Hitherto, the difference between elder and younger brother had never been felt between us, but at the period of which I am speaking, I began to have a notion that I was not Woloda's equal either in years, in tastes, or in capabilities. I even began to fancy that Woloda himself was aware of his superiority and that he was proud of it, and, though, perhaps, I was wrong, the idea wounded my conceit--already suffering from frequent comparison with him. He was my superior in everything--in games, in studies, in quarrels, and in deportment. All this brought about an estrangement between us and occasioned me moral sufferings which I had never hitherto experienced.

When for the first time Woloda wore Dutch pleated shirts, I at once said that I was greatly put out at not being given similar ones, and each time that he arranged his collar, I felt that he was doing so on purpose to offend me. But, what tormented me most of all was the idea that Woloda could see through me, yet did not choose to show it.

Who has not known those secret, wordless communications which spring from some barely perceptible smile or movement--from a casual glance between two persons who live as constantly together as do brothers, friends, man and wife, or master and servant--particularly if those two persons do not in all things cultivate mutual frankness? How many

half-expressed wishes, thoughts, and meanings which one shrinks from revealing are made plain by a single accidental glance which timidly and irresolutely meets the eye!

However, in my own case I may have been deceived by my excessive capacity for, and love of, analysis. Possibly Woloda did not feel at all as I did. Passionate and frank, but unstable in his likings, he was attracted by the most diverse things, and always surrendered himself wholly to such attraction. For instance, he suddenly conceived a passion for pictures, spent all his money on their purchase, begged Papa, Grandmamma, and his drawing master to add to their number, and applied himself with enthusiasm to art. Next came a sudden rage for curios, with which he covered his table, and for which he ransacked the whole house. Following upon that, he took to violent novel-reading--procuring such works by stealth, and devouring them day and night. Involuntarily I was influenced by his whims, for, though too proud to imitate him, I was also too young and too lacking in independence to choose my own way. Above all, I envied Woloda his happy, nobly frank character, which showed itself most strikingly when we quarrelled. I always felt that he was in the right, yet could not imitate him. For instance, on one occasion when his passion for curios was at its height, I went to his table and accidentally broke an empty many-coloured smelling-bottle.

"Who gave you leave to touch my things?" asked Woloda, chancing to enter the room at that moment and at once perceiving the disorder which I had occasioned in the orderly arrangement of the treasures on his table.

"And where is that smelling bottle? Perhaps you--?"

"I let it fall, and it smashed to pieces; but what does that matter?"

"Well, please do me the favour never to DARE to touch my things again," he said as he gathered up the broken fragments and looked at them vexedly.

"And will YOU please do me the favour never to ORDER me to do anything whatever," I retorted. "When a thing's broken, it's broken, and there is no more to be said." Then I smiled, though I hardly felt like smiling.

"Oh, it may mean nothing to you, but to me it means a good deal," said Woloda, shrugging his shoulders (a habit he had caught from Papa).

"First of all you go and break my things, and then you laugh. What a nuisance a little boy can be!"

"LITTLE boy, indeed? Then YOU, I suppose, are a man, and ever so wise?"

"I do not intend to quarrel with you," said Woloda, giving me a slight push. "Go away."

"Don't you push me!"

"Go away."

"I say again--don't you push me!"

Woloda took me by the hand and tried to drag me away from the table, but I was excited to the last degree, and gave the table such a push with my foot that I upset the whole concern, and brought china and crystal ornaments and everything else with a crash to the floor.

"You disgusting little brute!" exclaimed Woloda, trying to save some of his falling treasures.

"At last all is over between us," I thought to myself as I strode from the room. "We are separated now for ever."

It was not until evening that we again exchanged a word. Yet I felt guilty, and was afraid to look at him, and remained at a loose end all day.

Woloda, on the contrary, did his lessons as diligently as ever, and passed the time after luncheon in talking and laughing with the girls. As soon, again, as afternoon lessons were over I left the room, for it would have been terribly embarrassing for me to be alone with my brother. When, too, the evening class in history was ended I took my notebook and moved towards the door. Just as I passed Woloda, I pouted and pulled an angry face, though in reality I should have liked to have made my peace with him. At the same moment he lifted his head, and with a barely perceptible and good-humouredly satirical smile looked me full

in the face. Our eyes met, and I saw that he understood me, while he, for his part, saw that I knew that he understood me; yet a feeling stronger than myself obliged me to turn away from him.

"Nicolinka," he said in a perfectly simple and anything but mock-pathetic way, "you have been angry with me long enough. I am sorry if I offended you," and he tendered me his hand.

It was as though something welled up from my heart and nearly choked me. Presently it passed away, the tears rushed to my eyes, and I felt immensely relieved.

"I too am so-rry, Wo-lo-da," I said, taking his hand. Yet he only looked at me with an expression as though he could not understand why there should be tears in my eyes.