

XXV. WOLODA'S FRIENDS

Although, when in the society of Woloda's friends, I had to play a part that hurt my pride, I liked sitting in his room when he had visitors, and silently watching all they did. The two who came most frequently to see him were a military adjutant called Dubkoff and a student named Prince Nechludoff. Dubkoff was a little dark-haired, highly-strung man who, though short of stature and no longer in his first youth, had a pleasing and invariably cheerful air. His was one of those limited natures which are agreeable through their very limitations; natures which cannot regard matters from every point of view, but which are nevertheless attracted by everything. Usually the reasoning of such persons is false and one-sided, yet always genuine and taking; wherefore their narrow egotism seems both amiable and excusable. There were two other reasons why Dubkoff had charms for Woloda and myself--namely, the fact that he was of military appearance, and, secondly (and principally), the fact that he was of a certain age--an age with which young people are apt to associate that quality of "gentlemanliness" which is so highly esteemed at their time of life. However, he was in very truth un homme comme il faut. The only thing which I did not like about it all was that, in his presence, Woloda always seemed ashamed of my innocent behaviour, and still more so of my youthfulness. As for Prince Nechludoff, he was in no way handsome, since neither his small grey eyes, his low, projecting forehead, nor his disproportionately long hands and feet could be called good features. The only good points about him were his unusually tall stature, his delicate colouring, and

his splendid teeth. Nevertheless, his face was of such an original, energetic character (owing to his narrow, sparkling eyes and ever-changing expression--now stern, now childlike, now smiling indeterminately) that it was impossible to help noticing it. As a rule he was very shy, and would blush to the ears at the smallest trifle, but it was a shyness altogether different from mine, seeing that, the more he blushed, the more determined-looking he grew, as though he were vexed at his own weakness.

Although he was on very good terms with Woloda and Dubkoff, it was clearly chance which had united them thus, since their tastes were entirely dissimilar. Woloda and Dubkoff seemed to be afraid of anything like serious consideration or emotion, whereas Nechludoff was beyond all things an enthusiast, and would often, despite their sarcastic remarks, plunge into dissertations on philosophical matters or matters of feeling. Again, the two former liked talking about the fair objects of their adoration (these were always numerous, and always shared by the friends in common), whereas Nechludoff invariably grew annoyed when taxed with his love for a certain red-haired lady.

Again, Woloda and Dubkoff often permitted themselves to criticise their relatives, and to find amusement in so doing, but Nechludoff flew into a tremendous rage when on one occasion they referred to some weak points in the character of an aunt of his whom he adored. Finally, after supper Woloda and Dubkoff would usually go off to some place whither Nechludoff would not accompany them; wherefore they called him "a dainty girl."

The very first time that I ever saw Prince Nechludoff I was struck with his exterior and conversation. Yet, though I could discern a great similarity between his disposition and my own (or perhaps it was because I COULD so discern it), the impression which he produced upon me at first was anything but agreeable. I liked neither his quick glance, his hard voice, his proud bearing, nor (least of all) the utter indifference with which he treated me. Often, when conversing, I burned to contradict him, to punish his pride by confuting him, to show him that I was clever in spite of his disdainful neglect of my presence. But I was invariably prevented from doing so by my shyness.