

## XXVI. DISCUSSIONS

Woloda was lying reading a French novel on the sofa when I paid my usual visit to his room after my evening lessons. He looked up at me for a moment from his book, and then went on reading. This perfectly simple and natural movement, however, offended me. I conceived that the glance implied a question why I had come and a wish to hide his thoughts from me (I may say that at that period a tendency to attach a meaning to the most insignificant of acts formed a prominent feature in my character). So I went to the table and also took up a book to read. Yet, even before I had actually begun reading, the idea struck me how ridiculous it was that, although we had never seen one another all day, we should have not a word to exchange.

"Are you going to stay in to-night, Woloda?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Oh, because--" Seeing that the conversation did not promise to be a success, I took up my book again, and began to read. Yet it was a strange thing that, though we sometimes passed whole hours together without speaking when we were alone, the mere presence of a third--sometimes of a taciturn and wholly uninteresting person--sufficed to plunge us into the most varied and engrossing of discussions. The truth was that we knew one another too well, and to know a person either too well or too little acts as a bar to intimacy.

"Is Woloda at home?" came in Dubkoff's voice from the ante-room.

"Yes!" shouted Woloda, springing up and throwing aside his book.

Dubkoff and Nechludoff entered.

"Are you coming to the theatre, Woloda?"

"No, I have no time," he replied with a blush.

"Oh, never mind that. Come along."

"But I haven't got a ticket."

"Tickets, as many as you like, at the entrance."

"Very well, then; I'll be back in a minute," said Woloda evasively as he left the room. I knew very well that he wanted to go, but that he had declined because he had no money, and had now gone to borrow five roubles of one of the servants--to be repaid when he got his next allowance.

"How do you do, DIPLOMAT?" said Dubkoff to me as he shook me by the hand. Woloda's friends had called me by that nickname since the day when Grandmamma had said at luncheon that Woloda must go into the army, but

that she would like to see me in the diplomatic service, dressed in a black frock-coat, and with my hair arranged a la coq (the two essential requirements, in her opinion, of a DIPLOMAT).

"Where has Woloda gone to?" asked Nechludoff.

"I don't know," I replied, blushing to think that nevertheless they had probably guessed his errand.

"I suppose he has no money? Yes, I can see I am right, O diplomatist," he added, taking my smile as an answer in the affirmative. "Well, I have none, either. Have you any, Dubkoff?"

"I'll see," replied Dubkoff, feeling for his pocket, and rummaging gingerly about with his squat little fingers among his small change.

"Yes, here are five copecks-twenty, but that's all," he concluded with a comic gesture of his hand.

At this point Woloda re-entered.

"Are we going?"

"No."

"What an odd fellow you are!" said Nechludoff. "Why don't you say that you have no money? Here, take my ticket."

"But what are you going to do?"

"He can go into his cousin's box," said Dubkoff.

"No, I'm not going at all," replied Nechludoff.

"Why?"

"Because I hate sitting in a box."

"And for what reason?"

"I don't know. Somehow I feel uncomfortable there."

"Always the same! I can't understand a fellow feeling uncomfortable when he is sitting with people who are fond of him. It is unnatural, mon cher."

"But what else is there to be done si je suis tant timide? You never blushed in your life, but I do at the least trifle," and he blushed at that moment.

"Do you know what that nervousness of yours proceeds from?" said Dubkoff in a protecting sort of tone, "D'un exces d'amour propre, mon cher."

"What do you mean by 'exces d'amour propre'?" asked Nechcludoff, highly offended. "On the contrary, I am shy just because I have TOO LITTLE amour propre. I always feel as though I were being tiresome and disagreeable, and therefore--"

"Well, get ready, Woloda," interrupted Dubkoff, tapping my brother on the shoulder and handing him his cloak. "Ignaz, get your master ready."

"Therefore," continued Nechcludoff, "it often happens with me that--"

But Dubkoff was not listening. "Tra-la-la-la," and he hummed a popular air.

"Oh, but I'm not going to let you off," went on Nechcludoff. "I mean to prove to you that my shyness is not the result of conceit."

"You can prove it as we go along."

"But I have told you that I am NOT going."

"Well, then, stay here and prove it to the DIPLOMAT, and he can tell us all about it when we return."

"Yes, that's what I WILL do," said Nechcludoff with boyish obstinacy, "so hurry up with your return."

"Well, do you think I am egotistic?" he continued, seating himself beside me.

True, I had a definite opinion on the subject, but I felt so taken aback by this unexpected question that at first I could make no reply.

"Yes, I DO think so," I said at length in a faltering voice, and colouring at the thought that at last the moment had come when I could show him that I was clever. "I think that EVERYBODY is egotistic, and that everything we do is done out of egotism."

"But what do you call egotism?" asked Nechudoff--smiling, as I thought, a little contemptuously.

"Egotism is a conviction that we are better and cleverer than any one else," I replied.

"But how can we ALL be filled with this conviction?" he inquired.

"Well, I don't know if I am right or not--certainly no one but myself seems to hold the opinion--but I believe that I am wiser than any one else in the world, and that all of you know it."

"At least I can say for myself," observed Nechudoff, "that I have met a FEW people whom I believe to excel me in wisdom."

"It is impossible," I replied with conviction.

"Do you really think so?" he said, looking at me gravely.

"Yes, really," I answered, and an idea crossed my mind which I proceeded to expound further. "Let me prove it to you. Why do we love ourselves better than any one else? Because we think ourselves BETTER than any one else--more worthy of our own love. If we THOUGHT others better than ourselves, we should LOVE them better than ourselves: but that is never the case. And even if it were so, I should still be right," I added with an involuntary smile of complacency.

For a few minutes Nechudoff was silent.

"I never thought you were so clever," he said with a smile so goodhumoured and charming that I at once felt happy.

Praise exercises an all-potent influence, not only upon the feelings, but also upon the intellect; so that under the influence of that agreeable sensation I straightway felt much cleverer than before, and thoughts began to rush with extraordinary rapidity through my head. From egotism we passed insensibly to the theme of love, which seemed inexhaustible. Although our reasonings might have sounded nonsensical to a listener (so vague and one-sided were they), for ourselves they had a profound significance. Our minds were so perfectly in harmony that not a chord was struck in the one without awakening an echo in the other, and

in this harmonious striking of different chords we found the greatest delight. Indeed, we felt as though time and language were insufficient to express the thoughts which seethed within us.