

XXVII. THE BEGINNING OF OUR FRIENDSHIP

From that time forth, a strange, but exceedingly pleasant, relation subsisted between Dimitri Nechludoff and myself. Before other people he paid me scanty attention, but as soon as ever we were alone, we would sit down together in some comfortable corner and, forgetful both of time and of everything around us, fall to reasoning.

We talked of a future life, of art, service, marriage, and education; nor did the idea ever occur to us that very possibly all we said was shocking nonsense. The reason why it never occurred to us was that the nonsense which we talked was good, sensible nonsense, and that, so long as one is young, one can appreciate good nonsense, and believe in it. In youth the powers of the mind are directed wholly to the future, and that future assumes such various, vivid, and alluring forms under the influence of hope--hope based, not upon the experience of the past, but upon an assumed possibility of happiness to come--that such dreams of expected felicity constitute in themselves the true happiness of that period of our life. How I loved those moments in our metaphysical discussions (discussions which formed the major portion of our intercourse) when thoughts came thronging faster and faster, and, succeeding one another at lightning speed, and growing more and more abstract, at length attained such a pitch of elevation that one felt powerless to express them, and said something quite different from what one had intended at first to say! How I liked those moments, too, when, carried higher and higher into the realms of thought, we suddenly felt

that we could grasp its substance no longer and go no further!

At carnival time Nechudoff was so much taken up with one festivity and another that, though he came to see us several times a day, he never addressed a single word to me. This offended me so much that once again I found myself thinking him a haughty, disagreeable fellow, and only awaited an opportunity to show him that I no longer valued his company or felt any particular affection for him. Accordingly, the first time that he spoke to me after the carnival, I said that I had lessons to do, and went upstairs, but a quarter of an hour later some one opened the schoolroom door, and Nechudoff entered.

"Am I disturbing you?" he asked.

"No," I replied, although I had at first intended to say that I had a great deal to do.

"Then why did you run away just now? It is a long while since we had a talk together, and I have grown so accustomed to these discussions that I feel as though something were wanting."

My anger had quite gone now, and Dimitri stood before me the same good and lovable being as before.

"You know, perhaps, why I ran away?" I said.

"Perhaps I do," he answered, taking a seat near me. "However, though it is possible I know why, I cannot say it straight out, whereas YOU can."

"Then I will do so. I ran away because I was angry with you--well, not angry, but grieved. I always have an idea that you despise me for being so young."

"Well, do you know why I always feel so attracted towards you?" he replied, meeting my confession with a look of kind understanding, "and why I like you better than any of my other acquaintances or than any of the people among whom I mostly have to live? It is because I found out at once that you have the rare and astonishing gift of sincerity."

"Yes, I always confess the things of which I am most ashamed--but only to people in whom I trust," I said.

"Ah, but to trust a man you must be his friend completely, and we are not friends yet, Nicolas. Remember how, when we were speaking of friendship, we agreed that, to be real friends, we ought to trust one another implicitly."

"I trust you in so far as that I feel convinced that you would never repeat a word of what I might tell you," I said.

"Yet perhaps the most interesting and important thoughts of all are just those which we never tell one another, while the mean thoughts

(the thoughts which, if we only knew that we had to confess them to one another, would probably never have the hardihood to enter our minds)--Well, do you know what I am thinking of, Nicolas?" he broke off, rising and taking my hand with a smile. "I propose (and I feel sure that it would benefit us mutually) that we should pledge our word to one another to tell each other EVERYTHING. We should then really know each other, and never have anything on our consciences. And, to guard against outsiders, let us also agree never to speak of one another to a third person. Suppose we do that?"

"I agree," I replied. And we did it. What the result was shall be told hereafter.

Kerr has said that every attachment has two sides: one loves, and the other allows himself to be loved; one kisses, and the other surrenders his cheek. That is perfectly true. In the case of our own attachment it was I who kissed, and Dimitri who surrendered his cheek--though he, in his turn, was ready to pay me a similar salute. We loved equally because we knew and appreciated each other thoroughly, but this did not prevent him from exercising an influence over me, nor myself from rendering him adoration.

It will readily be understood that Nechludoff's influence caused me to adopt his bent of mind, the essence of which lay in an enthusiastic reverence for ideal virtue and a firm belief in man's vocation to perpetual perfection. To raise mankind, to abolish vice and misery,

seemed at that time a task offering no difficulties. To educate oneself to every virtue, and so to achieve happiness, seemed a simple and easy matter.

Only God Himself knows whether those blessed dreams of youth were ridiculous, or whose the fault was that they never became realised.