

XIX -- THE IWINS

"Woloda, Woloda! The Iwins are just coming." I shouted on seeing from the window three boys in blue overcoats, and followed by a young tutor, advancing along the pavement opposite our house.

The Iwins were related to us, and of about the same age as ourselves. We had made their acquaintance soon after our arrival in Moscow. The second brother, Seriosha, had dark curly hair, a turned-up, strongly pronounced nose, very bright red lips (which, never being quite shut, showed a row of white teeth), beautiful dark-blue eyes, and an uncommonly bold expression of face. He never smiled but was either wholly serious or laughing a clear, merry, agreeable laugh. His striking good looks had captivated me from the first, and I felt an irresistible attraction towards him. Only to see him filled me with pleasure, and at one time my whole mental faculties used to be concentrated in the wish that I might do so. If three or four days passed without my seeing him I felt listless and ready to cry. Awake or asleep, I was forever dreaming of him. On going to bed I used to see him in my dreams, and when I had shut my eyes and called up a picture of him I hugged the vision as my choicest delight. So much store did I set upon this feeling for my friend that I never mentioned it to any one. Nevertheless, it must have annoyed him to see my admiring eyes constantly fixed upon him, or else he must have felt no reciprocal attraction, for he always preferred to play and talk with Woloda. Still, even with that I felt satisfied, and wished and asked for nothing better than to be ready at any time to make

any sacrifice for him. Likewise, over and above the strange fascination which he exercised upon me, I always felt another sensation, namely, a dread of making him angry, of offending him, of displeasing him. Was this because his face bore such a haughty expression, or because I, despising my own exterior, over-rated the beautiful in others, or, lastly (and most probably), because it is a common sign of affection? At all events, I felt as much fear, of him as I did love. The first time that he spoke to me I was so overwhelmed with sudden happiness that I turned pale, then red, and could not utter a word. He had an ugly habit of blinking when considering anything seriously, as well as of twitching his nose and eyebrows. Consequently every one thought that this habit marred his face. Yet I thought it such a nice one that I involuntarily adopted it for myself, until, a few days after I had made his acquaintance, Grandmamma suddenly asked me whether my eyes were hurting me, since I was winking like an owl! Never a word of affection passed between us, yet he felt his power over me, and unconsciously but tyrannically, exercised it in all our childish intercourse. I used to long to tell him all that was in my heart, yet was too much afraid of him to be frank in any way, and, while submitting myself to his will, tried to appear merely careless and indifferent. Although at times his influence seemed irksome and intolerable, to throw it off was beyond my strength.

I often think with regret of that fresh, beautiful feeling of boundless, disinterested love which came to an end without having ever found self-expression or return. It is strange how, when a child, I always

longed to be like grown-up people, and yet how I have often longed, since childhood's days, for those days to come back to me! Many times, in my relations with Seriosha, this wish to resemble grown-up people put a rude check upon the love that was waiting to expand, and made me repress it. Not only was I afraid of kissing him, or of taking his hand and saying how glad I was to see him, but I even dreaded calling him "Seriosha" and always said "Sergius" as every one else did in our house. Any expression of affection would have seemed like evidence of childishness, and any one who indulged in it, a baby. Not having yet passed through those bitter experiences which enforce upon older years circumspection and coldness, I deprived myself of the pure delight of a fresh, childish instinct for the absurd purpose of trying to resemble grown-up people.

I met the Iwins in the ante-room, welcomed them, and then ran to tell Grandmamma of their arrival with an expression as happy as though she were certain to be equally delighted. Then, never taking my eyes off Seriosha, I conducted the visitors to the drawing-room, and eagerly followed every movement of my favourite. When Grandmamma spoke to and fixed her penetrating glance upon him, I experienced that mingled sensation of pride and solicitude which an artist might feel when waiting for revered lips to pronounce a judgment upon his work.

With Grandmamma's permission, the Iwins' young tutor, Herr Frost, accompanied us into the little back garden, where he seated himself upon a bench, arranged his legs in a tasteful attitude, rested his

brass-knobbed cane between them, lighted a cigar, and assumed the air of a man well-pleased with himself. He was a German, but of a very different sort to our good Karl Ivanitch. In the first place, he spoke both Russian and French correctly, though with a hard accent. Indeed, he enjoyed--especially among the ladies--the reputation of being a very accomplished fellow. In the second place, he wore a reddish moustache, a large gold pin set with a ruby, a black satin tie, and a very fashionable suit. Lastly, he was young, with a handsome, self-satisfied face and fine muscular legs. It was clear that he set the greatest store upon the latter, and thought them beyond compare, especially as regards the favour of the ladies. Consequently, whether sitting or standing, he always tried to exhibit them in the most favourable light. In short, he was a type of the young German-Russian whose main desire is to be thought perfectly gallant and gentlemanly.

In the little garden merriment reigned. In fact, the game of "robbers" never went better. Yet an incident occurred which came near to spoiling it. Seriosha was the robber, and in pouncing upon some travellers he fell down and knocked his leg so badly against a tree that I thought the leg must be broken. Consequently, though I was the gendarme and therefore bound to apprehend him, I only asked him anxiously, when I reached him, if he had hurt himself very much. Nevertheless this threw him into a passion, and made him exclaim with fists clenched and in a voice which showed by its faltering what pain he was enduring, "Why, whatever is the matter? Is this playing the game properly? You ought to arrest me. Why on earth don't you do so?" This he repeated several

times, and then, seeing Woloda and the elder Iwin (who were taking the part of the travellers) jumping and running about the path, he suddenly threw himself upon them with a shout and loud laughter to effect their capture. I cannot express my wonder and delight at this valiant behaviour of my hero. In spite of the severe pain, he had not only refrained from crying, but had repressed the least symptom of suffering and kept his eye fixed upon the game! Shortly after this occurrence another boy, Ilinka Grap, joined our party. We went upstairs, and Seriosha gave me an opportunity of still further appreciating and taking delight in his manly bravery and fortitude. This was how it was.

Ilinka was the son of a poor foreigner who had been under certain obligations to my Grandpapa, and now thought it incumbent upon him to send his son to us as frequently as possible. Yet if he thought that the acquaintance would procure his son any advancement or pleasure, he was entirely mistaken, for not only were we anything but friendly to Ilinka, but it was seldom that we noticed him at all except to laugh at him. He was a boy of thirteen, tall and thin, with a pale, birdlike face, and a quiet, good-tempered expression. Though poorly dressed, he always had his head so thickly pomaded that we used to declare that on warm days it melted and ran down his neck. When I think of him now, it seems to me that he was a very quiet, obliging, and good-tempered boy, but at the time I thought him a creature so contemptible that he was not worth either attention or pity.

Upstairs we set ourselves to astonish each other with gymnastic tours de

force. Ilinka watched us with a faint smile of admiration, but refused an invitation to attempt a similar feat, saying that he had no strength.

Seriosha was extremely captivating. His face and eyes glowed with laughter as he surprised us with tricks which we had never seen before. He jumped over three chairs put together, turned somersaults right across the room, and finally stood on his head on a pyramid of Tatistchev's dictionaries, moving his legs about with such comical rapidity that it was impossible not to help bursting with merriment.

After this last trick he pondered for a moment (blinking his eyes as usual), and then went up to Ilinka with a very serious face.

"Try and do that," he said. "It is not really difficult."

Ilinka, observing that the general attention was fixed upon him, blushed, and said in an almost inaudible voice that he could not do the feat.

"Well, what does he mean by doing nothing at all? What a girl the fellow is! He has just GOT to stand on his head," and Seriosha, took him by the hand.

"Yes, on your head at once! This instant, this instant!" every one shouted as we ran upon Ilinka and dragged him to the dictionaries, despite his being visibly pale and frightened.

"Leave me alone! You are tearing my jacket!" cried the unhappy victim, but his exclamations of despair only encouraged us the more. We were dying with laughter, while the green jacket was bursting at every seam.

Woloda and the eldest Iwin took his head and placed it on the dictionaries, while Seriosha, and I seized his poor, thin legs (his struggles had stripped them upwards to the knees), and with boisterous, laughter held them uptight--the youngest Iwin superintending his general equilibrium.

Suddenly a moment of silence occurred amid our boisterous laughter--a moment during which nothing was to be heard in the room but the panting of the miserable Ilinka. It occurred to me at that moment that, after all, there was nothing so very comical and pleasant in all this.

"Now, THAT'S a boy!" cried Seriosha, giving Ilinka a smack with his hand. Ilinka said nothing, but made such desperate movements with his legs to free himself that his foot suddenly kicked Seriosha in the eye: with the result that, letting go of Ilinka's leg and covering the wounded member with one hand, Seriosha hit out at him with all his might with the other one. Of course Ilinka's legs slipped down as, sinking exhausted to the floor and half-suffocated with tears, he stammered out:

"Why should you bully me so?"

The poor fellow's miserable figure, with its streaming tears, ruffled hair, and crumpled trousers revealing dirty boots, touched us a little, and we stood silent and trying to smile.

Seriosha was the first to recover himself.

"What a girl! What a gaby!" he said, giving Ilinka a slight kick. "He can't take things in fun a bit. Well, get up, then."

"You are an utter beast! That's what YOU are!" said Ilinka, turning miserably away and sobbing.

"Oh, oh! Would it still kick and show temper, then?" cried Seriosha, seizing a dictionary and throwing it at the unfortunate boy's head. Apparently it never occurred to Ilinka to take refuge from the missile; he merely guarded his head with his hands.

"Well, that's enough now," added Seriosha, with a forced laugh. "You DESERVE to be hurt if you can't take things in fun. Now let's go downstairs."

I could not help looking with some compassion at the miserable creature on the floor as, his face buried in the dictionary, he lay there sobbing almost as though he were in a fit.

"Oh, Sergius!" I said. "Why have you done this?"

"Well, you did it too! Besides, I did not cry this afternoon when I knocked my leg and nearly broke it."

"True enough," I thought. "Ilinka is a poor whining sort of a chap, while Seriosha is a boy--a REAL boy."

It never occurred to my mind that possibly poor Ilinka was suffering far less from bodily pain than from the thought that five companions for whom he may have felt a genuine liking had, for no reason at all, combined to hurt and humiliate him.

I cannot explain my cruelty on this occasion. Why did I not step forward to comfort and protect him? Where was the pitifulness which often made me burst into tears at the sight of a young bird fallen from its nest, or of a puppy being thrown over a wall, or of a chicken being killed by the cook for soup?

Can it be that the better instinct in me was overshadowed by my affection for Seriosha and the desire to shine before so brave a boy? If so, how contemptible were both the affection and the desire! They alone form dark spots on the pages of my youthful recollections.