

X. THE EXAMINATION IN HISTORY

ON the 16th of April I entered, for the first time, and under the wing of St. Jerome, the great hall of the University. I had driven there with St. Jerome in our smart phaeton and wearing the first frockcoat of my life, while the whole of my other clothes--even down to my socks and linen--were new and of a grander sort. When a Swiss waiter relieved me of my greatcoat, and I stood before him in all the beauty of my attire, I felt almost sorry to dazzle him so. Yet I had no sooner entered the bright, carpeted, crowded hall, and caught sight of hundreds of other young men in gymnasium [The Russian gymnasium = the English grammar or secondary school.] uniforms or frockcoats (of whom but a few threw me an indifferent glance), as well as, at the far end, of some solemn-looking professors who were seated on chairs or walking carelessly about among some tables, than I at once became disabused of the notion that I should attract the general attention, while the expression of my face, which at home, and even in the vestibule of the University buildings, had denoted only a kind of vague regret that I should have to present so important and distinguished an appearance, became exchanged for an expression of the most acute nervousness and dejection. However, I soon picked up again when I perceived sitting at one of the desks a very badly, untidily dressed gentleman who, though not really old, was almost entirely grey. He was occupying a seat quite at the back of the hall and a little apart from the rest, so I hastened to sit down beside him, and then fell to looking at the candidates for examination, and to forming conclusions about them. Many different figures and faces were there to

be seen there; yet, in my opinion, they all seemed to divide themselves into three classes. First of all, there were youths like myself, attending for examination in the company of their parents or tutors. Among such I could see the youngest Iwin (accompanied by Frost) and Ilinka Grap (accompanied by his old father). All youths of this class wore the early beginnings of beards, sported prominent linen, sat quietly in their places, and never opened the books and notebooks which they had brought with them, but gazed at the professors and examination tables with ill-concealed nervousness. The second class of candidates were young men in gymnasium uniforms. Several of them had attained to the dignity of shaving, and most of them knew one another. They talked loudly, called the professors by their names and surnames, occupied themselves in getting their subjects ready, exchanged notebooks, climbed over desks, fetched themselves pies and sandwiches from the vestibule, and ate them then and there merely lowering their heads to the level of a desk for propriety's sake. Lastly, the third class of candidates (which seemed a small one) consisted of oldish men--some of them in frock coats, but the majority in jackets, and with no linen to be seen. These preserved a serious demeanour, sat by themselves, and had a very dingy look. The man who had afforded me consolation by being worse dressed than myself belonged to this class. Leaning forward upon his elbows, and running his fingers through his grey, dishevelled hair as he read some book or another, he had thrown me only a momentary glance--and that not a very friendly one--from a pair of glittering eyes. Then, as I sat down, he had frowned grimly, and stuck a shiny elbow out to prevent me from coming any nearer. On the other hand, the gymnasium men were

over-sociable, and I felt rather afraid of their proximity. One of them did not hesitate to thrust a book into my hands, saying, "Give that to that fellow over there, will you?" while another of them exclaimed as he pushed past me, "By your leave, young fellow!" and a third made use of my shoulder as a prop when he wanted to scramble over a desk. All this seemed to me a little rough and unpleasant, for I looked upon myself as immensely superior to such fellows, and considered that they ought not to treat me with such familiarity. At length, the names began to be called out. The gymnasium men walked out boldly, answered their questions (apparently) well, and came back looking cheerful. My own class of candidates were much more diffident, as well as appeared to answer worse. Of the oldish men, some answered well, and some very poorly. When the name "Semenoff" was called out my neighbour with the grey hair and glittering eyes jostled me roughly, stepped over my legs, and went up to one of the examiners' tables. It was plain from the aspect of the professors that he answered well and with assurance, yet, on returning to his place, he did not wait to see where he was placed on the list, but quietly collected his notebooks and departed. Several times I shuddered at the sound of the voice calling out the names, but my turn did not come in exact alphabetical order, though already names had begun to be called beginning with "I."

"Ikonin and Tenieff!" suddenly shouted some one from the professors' end of the hall.

"Go on, Ikonin! You are being called," said a tall, red-faced gymnasium

student near me. "But who is this BARtenieff or MORtenieff or somebody?
I don't know him."

"It must be you," whispered St. Jerome loudly in my ear.

"MY name is IRtenieff," I said to the red-faced student. "Do you think
that was the name they were calling out?"

"Yes. Why on earth don't you go up?" he replied. "Lord, what a dandy!"
he added under his breath, yet not so quietly but that I failed to hear
the words as they came wafted to me from below the desk. In front of
me walked Ikonin--a tall young man of about twenty-five, who was one of
those whom I had classed as oldish men. He wore a tight brown frockcoat
and a blue satin tie, and had wisps of flaxen hair carefully brushed
over his collar in the peasant style. His appearance had already caught
my attention when we were sitting among the desks, and had given me an
impression that he was not bad-looking. Also I had noticed that he was
very talkative. Yet what struck me most about his physiognomy was a
tuft, of queer red hairs which he had under his chin, as well as, still
more, a strange habit of continually unbuttoning his waistcoat and
scratching his chest under his shirt.

Behind the table to which we were summoned sat three Professors, none of
whom acknowledged our salutations. A youngish professor was shuffling a
bundle of tickets like a pack of cards; another one, with a star on his
frockcoat, was gazing hard at a gymnasium student, who was repeating

something at great speed about Charles the Great, and adding to each of his sentences the word nakonetz [= the English colloquialism "you know."] while a third one--an old man in spectacles--proceeded to bend his head down as we approached, and, peering at us through his glasses, pointed silently to the tickets. I felt his glance go over both myself and Ikonin, and also felt sure that something about us had displeased him (perhaps it was Ikonin's red hairs), for, after taking another look at the pair of us, he motioned impatiently to us to be quick in taking our tickets. I felt vexed and offended--firstly, because none of the professors had responded to our bows, and, secondly, because they evidently coupled me with Ikonin under the one denomination of "candidates," and so were condemning me in advance on account of Ikonin's red hairs. I took my ticket boldly and made ready to answer, but the professor's eye passed over my head and alighted upon Ikonin. Accordingly, I occupied myself in reading my ticket. The questions printed on it were all familiar to me, so, as I silently awaited my turn, I gazed at what was passing near me, Ikonin seemed in no way diffident--rather the reverse, for, in reaching for his ticket, he threw his body half-way across the table. Then he gave his long hair a shake, and rapidly coned over what was written on his ticket. I think he had just opened his mouth to answer when the professor with the star dismissed the gymnasium student with a word of commendation, and then turned and looked at Ikonin. At once the latter seemed taken back, and stopped short. For about two minutes there was a dead silence.

"Well?" said the professor in the spectacles.

Once more Ikonin opened his mouth, and once more remained silent.

"Come! You are not the only one to be examined. Do you mean to answer or do you not?" said the youngish professor, but Ikonin did not even look at him. He was gazing fixedly at his ticket and uttered not a single word. The professor in the spectacles scanned him through his glasses, then over them, then without them (for, indeed, he had time to take them off, to wipe their lenses carefully, and to replace them). Still not a word from Ikonin. All at once, however, a smile spread itself over his face, and he gave his long hair another shake. Next he reached across the table, laid down his ticket, looked at each of the professors in turn and then at myself, and finally, wheeling round on his heels, made a gesture with his hand and returned to the desks. The professors stared blankly at one another.

"Bless the fellow!" said the youngish professor. "What an original!"

It was now my turn to move towards the table, but the professors went on talking in undertones among themselves, as though they were unaware of my presence. At the moment, I felt firmly persuaded that the three of them were engrossed solely with the question of whether I should merely PASS the examination or whether I should pass it WELL, and that it was only swagger which made them pretend that they did not care either way, and behave as though they had not seen me.

When at length the professor in the spectacles turned to me with an air of indifference, and invited me to answer, I felt hurt, as I looked at him, to think that he should have so undeceived me: wherefore I answered brokenly at first. In time, however, things came easier to my tongue, and, inasmuch as all the questions bore upon Russian history (which I knew thoroughly), I ended with eclat, and even went so far, in my desire to convince the professors that I was not Ikonin and that they must not in anyway confound me with him, as to offer to draw a second ticket. The professor in the spectacles, however, merely nodded his head, said "That will do," and marked something in his register. On returning to the desks, I at once learnt from the gymnasium men (who somehow seemed to know everything) that I had been placed fifth.