

## XII. MY EXAMINATION IN LATIN

All went well until my examination in Latin. So far, a gymnasium student stood first on the list, Semenoff second, and myself third. On the strength of it I had begun to swagger a little, and to think that, for all my youth, I was not to be despised.

From the first day of the examinations, I had heard every one speak with awe of the Professor of Latin, who appeared to be some sort of a wild beast who battered on the financial ruin of young men (of those, that is to say, who paid their own fees) and spoke only in the Greek and Latin tongues. However, St. Jerome, who had coached me in Latin, spoke encouragingly, and I myself thought that, since I could translate Cicero and certain parts of Horace without the aid of a lexicon, I should do no worse than the rest. Yet things proved otherwise. All the morning the air had been full of rumours concerning the tribulations of candidates who had gone up before me: rumours of how one young fellow had been accorded a nought, another one a single mark only, a third one greeted with abuse and threatened with expulsion, and so forth. Only Semenoff and the first gymnasium student had, as usual, gone up quietly, and returned to their seats with five marks credited to their names. Already I felt a prescience of disaster when Ikonin and myself found ourselves summoned to the little table at which the terrible professor sat in solitary grandeur.

The terrible professor turned out to be a little thin, bilious-looking

man with hair long and greasy and a face expressive of extraordinary sullenness. Handing Ikonin a copy of Cicero's Orations, he bid him translate. To my great astonishment Ikonin not only read off some of the Latin, but even managed to construe a few lines to the professor's prompting. At the same time, conscious of my superiority over such a feeble companion, I could not help smiling a little, and even looking rather contemptuous, when it came to a question of analysis, and Ikonin, as on previous occasions, plunged into a silence which promised never to end. I had hoped to please the professor by that knowing, slightly sarcastic smile of mine, but, as a matter of fact, I contrived to do quite the contrary.

"Evidently you know better than he, since you are laughing," he said to me in bad Russian. "Well, we shall see. Tell me the answer, then."

Later I learnt that the professor was Ikonin's guardian, and that Ikonin actually lived with him. I lost no time in answering the question in syntax which had been put to Ikonin, but the professor only pulled a long face and turned away from me.

"Well, your turn will come presently, and then we shall see how much you know," he remarked, without looking at me, but proceeding to explain to Ikonin the point on which he had questioned him.

"That will do," he added, and I saw him put down four marks to Ikonin in his register. "Come!" I thought to myself. "He cannot be so strict after

all."

When Ikonin had taken his departure the professor spent fully five minutes--five minutes which seemed to me five hours--in setting his books and tickets in order, in blowing his nose, in adjusting and sprawling about on his chair, in gazing down the hall, and in looking here, there, and everywhere--in doing everything, in fact, except once letting his eye rest upon me. Yet even that amount of dissimulation did not seem to satisfy him, for he next opened a book, and pretended to read it, for all the world as though I were not there at all. I moved a little nearer him, and gave a cough.

"Ah, yes! You too, of course! Well, translate me something," he remarked, handing me a book of some kind. "But no; you had better take this," and, turning over the leaves of a Horace, he indicated to me a passage which I should never have imagined possible of translation.

"I have not prepared this," I said.

"Oh! Then you only wish to answer things which you have got by heart, do you? Indeed? No, no; translate me that."

I started to grope for the meaning of the passage, but each questioning look which I threw at the professor was met by a shake of the head, a profound sigh, and an exclamation of "No, no!" Finally he banged the

book to with such a snap that he caught his finger between the covers. Angrily releasing it, he handed me a ticket containing questions in grammar, and, flinging himself back in his chair, maintained a menacing silence. I should have tried to answer the questions had not the expression of his face so clogged my tongue that nothing seemed to come from it right.

"No, no! That's not it at all!" he suddenly exclaimed in his horrible accent as he altered his posture to one of leaning forward upon the table and playing with the gold signet-ring which was nearly slipping from the little finger of his left hand. "That is not the way to prepare for serious study, my good sir. Fellows like yourself think that, once they have a gown and a blue collar to their backs, they have reached the summit of all things and become students. No, no, my dear sir. A subject needs to be studied FUNDAMENTALLY," and so on, and so on.

During this speech (which was uttered with a clipped sort of intonation) I went on staring dully at his lowered eyelids. Beginning with a fear lest I should lose my place as third on the list, I went on to fear lest I should pass at all. Next, these feelings became reinforced by a sense of injustice, injured self-respect, and unmerited humiliation, while the contempt which I felt for the professor as some one not quite (according to my ideas) "comme il faut"--a fact which I deduced from the shortness, strength, and roundness of his nails--flared up in me more and more and turned all my other feelings to sheer animosity. Happening, presently, to glance at me, and to note my quivering lips and tear-filled eyes, he

seemed to interpret my agitation as a desire to be accorded my marks and dismissed: wherefore, with an air of relenting, he said (in the presence of another professor who had just approached):

"Very well; I will accord you a 'pass'" (which signified two marks),  
"although you do not deserve it. I do so simply out of consideration for your youth, and in the hope that, when you begin your University career, you will learn to be less light-minded."

The concluding phrase, uttered in the hearing of the other professor (who at once turned his eyes upon me, as though remarking, "There! You see, young man!") completed my discomfiture. For a moment, a mist swam before my eyes--a mist in which the terrible professor seemed to be far away, as he sat at his table while for an instant a wild idea danced through my brain. "What if I DID do such a thing?" I thought to myself. "What would come of it?" However, I did not do the thing in question, but, on the contrary, made a bow of peculiar reverence to each of the professors, and with a slight smile on my face--presumably the same smile as that with which I had derided Ikonin--turned away from the table.

This piece of unfairness affected me so powerfully at the time that, had I been a free agent, I should have attended for no more examinations. My ambition was gone (since now I could not possibly be third), and I therefore let the other examinations pass without any exertion, or even agitation, on my part. In the general list I still stood fourth, but

that failed to interest me, since I had reasoned things out to myself, and come to the conclusion that to try for first place was stupid--even "bad form:" that, in fact, it was better to pass neither very well nor very badly, as Woloda had done. This attitude I decided to maintain throughout the whole of my University career, notwithstanding that it was the first point on which my opinion had differed from that of my friend Dimitri.

Yet, to tell the truth, my thoughts were already turning towards a uniform, a "mortar-board," and the possession of a drozhki of my own, a room of my own, and, above all, freedom of my own. And certainly the prospect had its charm.