

XIV. HOW WOLODA AND DUBKOFF AMUSED THEMSELVES

THE moment that Dimitri entered my room I perceived from his face, manner of walking, and the signs which, in him, denoted ill-humour--a blinking of the eyes and a grim holding of his head to one side, as though to straighten his collar--that he was in the coldly-correct frame of mind which was his when he felt dissatisfied with himself. It was a frame of mind, too, which always produced a chilling effect upon my feelings towards him. Of late I had begun to observe and appraise my friend's character a little more, but our friendship had in no way suffered from that, since it was still too young and strong for me to be able to look upon Dimitri as anything but perfect, no matter in what light I regarded him. In him there were two personalities, both of which I thought beautiful. One, which I loved devotedly, was kind, mild, forgiving, gay, and conscious of being those various things. When he was in this frame of mind his whole exterior, the very tone of his voice, his every movement, appeared to say: "I am kind and good-natured, and rejoice in being so, and every one can see that I so rejoice." The other of his two personalities--one which I had only just begun to apprehend, and before the majesty of which I bowed in spirit--was that of a man who was cold, stern to himself and to others, proud, religious to the point of fanaticism, and pedantically moral. At the present moment he was, as I say, this second personality.

With that frankness which constituted a necessary condition of our relations I told him, as soon as we entered the drozhki, how much it

depressed and hurt me to see him, on this my fete-day in a frame of mind so irksome and disagreeable to me.

"What has upset you so?" I asked him. "Will you not tell me?"

"My dear Nicolas," was his slow reply as he gave his head a nervous twitch to one side and blinked his eyes, "since I have given you my word never to conceal anything from you, you have no reason to suspect me of secretiveness. One cannot always be in exactly the same mood, and if I seem at all put out, that is all there is to say about it."

"What a marvellously open, honourable character his is!" I thought to myself, and dropped the subject.

We drove the rest of the way to Dubkoff's in silence. Dubkoff's flat was an unusually fine one--or, at all events, so it seemed to me. Everywhere were rugs, pictures, gardenias, striped hangings, photographs, and curved settees, while on the walls hung guns, pistols, pouches, and the mounted heads of wild beasts. It was the appearance of this apartment which made me aware whom, it was that Woloda had imitated in the scheme of his own sitting-room. We found Dubkoff and Woloda engaged in cards, while seated also at the table, and watching the game with close attention, was a gentleman whom I did not know, but who appeared to be of no great importance, judging by the modesty of his attitude.

Dubkoff himself was in a silk dressing-gown and soft slippers, while Woloda--seated opposite him on a divan--was in his shirtsleeves, as well

as (to judge by his flushed face and the impatient, cursory glance which he gave us for a second as he looked up from the cards) much taken up with the game. On seeing me, he reddened still more.

"Well, it is for you to deal," he remarked to Dubkoff. In an instant I divined that he did not altogether relish my becoming acquainted with the fact that he gambled. Yet his expression had nothing in it of confusion--only a look which seemed to me to say: "Yes, I play cards, and if you are surprised at that, it is only because you are so young. There is nothing wrong about it--it is a necessity at our age." Yes, I at once divined and understood that.

Instead of dealing, however, Dubkoff rose and shook hands with us; after which he bade us both be seated, and then offered us pipes, which we declined.

"Here is our DIPLOMAT, then--the hero of the day!" he said to me, "Good Lord! how you look like a colonel!"

"H-m!" I muttered in reply, though once more feeling a complacent smile overspread my countenance.

I stood in that awe of Dubkoff which a sixteen-year-old boy naturally feels for a twenty-seven-year-old man of whom his elders say that he is a very clever young man who can dance well and speak French, and who, though secretly despising one's youth, endeavours to conceal the fact.

Yet, despite my respect for him, I somehow found it difficult and uncomfortable, throughout my acquaintanceship with him, to look him in the eyes, I have since remarked that there are three kinds of men whom I cannot face easily, namely those who are much better than myself, those who are much worse, and those between whom and myself there is a mutual determination not to mention some particular thing of which we are both aware. Dubkoff may have been a much better fellow than myself, or he may have been a much worse; but the point was that he lied very frequently without recognising the fact that I was aware of his doing so, yet had determined not to mention it.

"Let us play another round," said Woloda, hunching one shoulder after the manner of Papa, and reshuffling the cards.

"How persistent you are!" said Dubkoff. "We can play all we want to afterwards. Well, one more round, then."

During the play, I looked at their hands. Woloda's hands were large and red, whilst in the crook of the thumb and the way in which the other fingers curved themselves round the cards as he held them they so exactly resembled Papa's that now and then I could not help thinking that Woloda purposely held the cards thus so as to look the more like a grownup. Yet the next moment, looking at his face, I could see that he had not a thought in his mind beyond the game. Dubkoff's hands, on the contrary, were small, puffy, and inclined to clench themselves, as well as extremely neat and small-fingered. They were just the kind of hands

which generally display rings, and which are most to be seen on persons who are both inclined to use them and fond of objets de vertu.

Woloda must have lost, for the gentleman who was watching the play remarked that Vladimir Petrovitch had terribly bad luck, while Dubkoff reached for a note book, wrote something in it, and then, showing Woloda what he had written, said:

"Is that right?"

"Yes." said Woloda, glancing with feigned carelessness at the note book.

"Now let us go."

Woloda took Dubkoff, and I gave Dimitri a lift in my drozhki.

"What were they playing at?" I inquired of Dimitri.

"At piquet. It is a stupid game. In fact, all such games are stupid."

"And were they playing for much?"

"No, not very much, but more than they ought to."

"Do you ever play yourself?"

"No; I swore never to do so; but Dubkoff will play with any one he can

get hold of."

"He ought not to do that," I remarked. "So Woloda does not play so well as he does?"

"Perhaps Dubkoff ought not to, as you say, yet there is nothing especially bad about it all. He likes playing, and plays well, but he is a good fellow all the same."

"I had no idea of this," I said.

"We must not think ill of him," concluded Dimitri, "since he is a simply splendid fellow. I like him very much, and always shall like him, in spite of his weakness."

For some reason or another the idea occurred to me that, just BECAUSE Dimitri stuck up so stoutly for Dubkoff, he neither liked nor respected him in reality, but was determined, out of stubbornness and a desire not to be accused of inconstancy, never to own to the fact. He was one of those people who love their friends their life long, not so much because those friends remain always dear to them, as because, having once--possibly mistakenly--liked a person, they look upon it as dishonourable to cease ever to do so.