

XV. I AM FETED AT DINNER

Dubkoff and Woloda knew every one at the restaurant by name, and every one, from the waiters to the proprietor, paid them great respect. No time was lost in allotting us a private room, where a bottle of iced champagne-upon which I tried to look with as much indifference as I could--stood ready waiting for us, and where we were served with a most wonderful repast selected by Dubkoff from the French menu. The meal went off most gaily and agreeably, notwithstanding that Dubkoff, as usual, told us blood-curdling tales of doubtful veracity (among others, a tale of how his grandmother once shot dead three robbers who were attacking her--a recital at which I blushed, closed my eyes, and turned away from the narrator), and that Woloda reddened visibly whenever I opened my mouth to speak--which was the more uncalled for on his part, seeing that never once, so far as I can remember, did I say anything shameful. After we had been given champagne, every one congratulated me, and I drank "hands across" with Dimitri and Dubkoff, and wished them joy. Since, however, I did not know to whom the bottle of champagne belonged (it was explained to me later that it was common property), I considered that, in return, I ought to treat my friends out of the money which I had never ceased to finger in my pocket. Accordingly, I stealthily extracted a ten-rouble note, and, beckoning the waiter to my side, handed him the money, and told him in a whisper (yet not so softly but that every one could hear me, seeing that every one was staring at me in dead silence) to "bring, if you please, a half-bottle of champagne." At this Woloda reddened again, and began to fidget so violently, and to gaze upon

myself and every one else with such a distracted air, that I felt sure I had somehow put my foot in it. However, the half-bottle came, and we drank it with great gusto. After that, things went on merrily. Dubkoff continued his unending fairy tales, while Woloda also told funny stories--and told them well, too--in a way I should never have credited him: so that our laughter rang long and loud. Their best efforts lay in imitation, and in variants of a certain well-known saw. "Have you ever been abroad?" one would say to the other, for instance. "No," the one interrogated would reply, "but my brother plays the fiddle." Such perfection had the pair attained in this species of comic absurdity that they could answer any question by its means, while they would also endeavour to unite two absolutely unconnected matters without a previous question having been asked at all, yet say everything with a perfectly serious face and produce a most comic effect. I too began to try to be funny, but as soon as ever I spoke they either looked at me askance or did not look at me until I had finished: so that my anecdotes fell flat. Yet, though Dubkoff always remarked, "Our DIPLOMAT is lying, brother," I felt so exhilarated with the champagne and the company of my elders that the remark scarcely touched me. Only Dimitri, though he drank level with the rest of us, continued in the same severe, serious frame of mind--a fact which put a certain check upon the general hilarity.

"Now, look here, gentlemen," said Dubkoff at last. "After dinner we ought to take the DIPLOMAT in hand. How would it be for him to go with us to see Auntie? There we could put him through his paces."

"Ah, but Nechludoff will not go there," objected Woloda.

"O unbearable, insupportable man of quiet habits that you are!" cried Dubkoff, turning to Dimitri. "Yet come with us, and you shall see what an excellent lady my dear Auntie is."

"I will neither go myself nor let him go," replied Dimitri.

"Let whom go? The DIPLOMAT? Why, you yourself saw how he brightened up at the very mention of Auntie."

"It is not so much that I WILL NOT LET HIM go," continued Dimitri, rising and beginning to pace the room without looking at me, "as that I neither wish him nor advise him to go. He is not a child now, and if he must go he can go alone--without you. Surely you are ashamed of this, Dubkoff?--ashamed of always wanting others to do all the wrong things that you yourself do?"

"But what is there so very wrong in my inviting you all to come and take a cup of tea with my Aunt?" said Dubkoff, with a wink at Woloda. "If you don't like us going, it is your affair; yet we are going all the same. Are you coming, Woloda?"

"Yes, yes," assented Woloda. "We can go there, and then return to my rooms and continue our piquet."

"Do you want to go with them or not?" said Dimitri, approaching me.

"No," I replied, at the same time making room for him to sit down beside me on the divan. "I did not wish to go in any case, and since you advise me not to, nothing on earth will make me go now. Yet," I added a moment later, "I cannot honestly say that I have NO desire to go. All I say is that I am glad I am not going."

"That is right," he said. "Live your own life, and do not dance to any one's piping. That is the better way."

This little tiff not only failed to mar our hilarity, but even increased it. Dimitri suddenly reverted to the kindly mood which I loved best--so great (as I afterwards remarked on more than one occasion) was the influence which the consciousness of having done a good deed exercised upon him. At the present moment the source of his satisfaction was the fact that he had stopped my expedition to "Auntie's." He grew extraordinarily gay, called for another bottle of champagne (which was against his rules), invited some one who was a perfect stranger into our room, plied him with wine, sang "Gaudeamus igitur," requested every one to join him in the chorus, and proposed that we should and rink at the Sokolniki. [Mews.]

"Let us enjoy ourselves to-night," he said with a laugh. "It is in honour of his matriculation that you now see me getting drunk for the first time in my life."

Yet somehow this merriment sat ill upon him. He was like some good-natured father or tutor who is pleased with his young charges, and lets himself go for their amusement, yet at the same time tries to show them that one can enjoy oneself decently and in an honourable manner. However, his unexpected gaiety had an infectious influence upon myself and my companions, and the more so because each of us had now drunk about half a bottle of champagne.

It was in this pleasing frame of mind that I went out into the main salon to smoke a cigarette which Dubkoff had given me. In rising I noticed that my head seemed to swim a little, and that my legs and arms retained their natural positions only when I bent my thoughts determinedly upon them. At other moments my legs would deviate from the straight line, and my arms describe strange gestures. I concentrated my whole attention upon the members in question, forced my hands first to raise themselves and button my tunic, and then to smooth my hair (though they ruffled my locks in doing so), and lastly commanded my legs to march me to the door--a function which they duly performed, though at one time with too much reluctance, and at another with too much ABANDON (the left leg, in particular, coming to a halt every moment on tiptoe). Some one called out to me, "Where are you going to? They will bring you a cigar-light directly," but I guessed the voice to be Woloda's, and, feeling satisfied, somehow, that I had succeeded in divining the fact, merely smiled airily in reply, and continued on my way.

