

XVI. THE QUARREL

In the main salon I perceived sitting at a small table a short, squat gentleman of the professional type. He had a red moustache, and was engaged in eating something or another, while by his side sat a tall, clean-shaven individual with whom he was carrying on a conversation in French. Somehow the aspect of these two persons displeased me; yet I decided, for all that, to light my cigarette at the candelabrum which was standing before them. Looking from side to side, to avoid meeting their gaze, I approached the table, and applied my cigarette to the flame. When it was fairly alight, I involuntarily threw a glance at the gentleman who was eating, and found his grey eyes fixed upon me with an expression of intense displeasure. Just as I was turning away his red moustache moved a little, and he said in French:

"I do not like people to smoke when I am dining, my good sir."

I murmured something inaudible.

"No, I do not like it at all," he went on sternly, and with a glance at his clean-shaven companion, as though inviting him to admire the way in which he was about to deal with me. "I do not like it, my good sir, nor do I like people who have the impudence to puff their smoke up one's very nose."

By this time I had gathered that it was myself he was scolding, and at

first felt as though I had been altogether in the wrong.

"I did not mean to inconvenience you," I said.

"Well, if you did not suppose you were being impertinent, at least I did! You are a cad, young sir!" he shouted in reply.

"But what right have you to shout at me like that?" I exclaimed, feeling that it was now HE that was insulting ME, and growing angry accordingly.

"This much right," he replied, "that I never allow myself to be overlooked by any one, and that I always teach young fellows like yourself their manners. What is your name, young sir, and where do you live?"

At this I felt so hurt that my teeth chattered, and I felt as though I were choking. Yet all the while I was conscious of being in the wrong, and so, instead of offering any further rudeness to the offended one, humbly told him my name and address.

"And MY name, young sir," he returned, "is Kolpikoff, and I will trouble you to be more polite to me in future.--However, You will hear from me again" ("vous aurez de mes nouvelles"--the conversation had been carried on wholly in French), was his concluding remark.

To this I replied, "I shall be delighted," with an infusion of as much

hauteur as I could muster into my tone. Then, turning on my heel, I returned with my cigarette--which had meanwhile gone out--to our own room.

I said nothing, either to my brother or my friends, about what had happened (and the more so because they were at that moment engaged in a dispute of their own), but sat down in a corner to think over the strange affair. The words, "You are a cad, young sir," vexed me more and more the longer that they sounded in my ears. My tipsiness was gone now, and, in considering my conduct during the dispute, the uncomfortable thought came over me that I had behaved like a coward.

"Yet what right had he to attack me?" I reflected. "Why did he not simply intimate to me that I was annoying him? After all, it may have been he that was in the wrong. Why, too, when he called me a young cad, did I not say to him, 'A cad, my good sir, is one who takes offence'? Or why did I not simply tell him to hold his tongue? That would have been the better course. Or why did I not challenge him to a duel? No, I did none of those things, but swallowed his insults like a wretched coward."

Still the words, "You are a cad, young sir," kept sounding in my ears with maddening iteration. "I cannot leave things as they are," I at length decided as I rose to my feet with the fixed intention of returning to the gentleman and saying something outrageous to him--perhaps, also, of breaking the candelabrum over his head if occasion offered. Yet, though I considered the advisability of this

last measure with some pleasure, it was not without a good deal of trepidation that I re-entered the main salon. As luck would have it, M. Kolpikoff was no longer there, but only a waiter engaged in clearing the table. For a moment I felt like telling the waiter the whole story, and explaining to him my innocence in the matter, but for some reason or another I thought better of it, and once more returned, in the same hazy condition of mind, to our own room.

"What has become of our DIPLOMAT?" Dubkoff was just saying. "Upon him now hang the fortunes of Europe."

"Oh, leave me alone," I said, turning moodily away. Then, as I paced the room, something made me begin to think that Dubkoff was not altogether a good fellow. "There is nothing very much to admire in his eternal jokes and his nickname of 'DIPLOMAT,'" I reflected. "All he thinks about is to win money from Woloda and to go and see his 'Auntie.' There is nothing very nice in all that. Besides, everything he says has a touch of blackguardism in it, and he is forever trying to make people laugh. In my opinion he is simply stupid when he is not absolutely a brute." I spent about five minutes in these reflections, and felt my enmity towards Dubkoff continually increasing. For his part, he took no notice of me, and that angered me the more. I actually felt vexed with Woloda and Dimitri because they went on talking to him.

"I tell you what, gentlemen: the DIPLOMAT ought to be christened," said Dubkoff suddenly, with a glance and a smile which seemed to me derisive,

and even treacherous. "Yet, O Lord, what a poor specimen he is!"

"You yourself ought to be christened, and you yourself are a sorry specimen!" I retorted with an evil smile, and actually forgetting to address him as "thou." [In Russian as in French, the second person singular is the form of speech used between intimate friends.]

This reply evidently surprised Dubkoff, but he turned away good-humouredly, and went on talking to Woloda and Dimitri. I tried to edge myself into the conversation, but, since I felt that I could not keep it up, I soon returned to my corner, and remained there until we left.

When the bill had been paid and wraps were being put on, Dubkoff turned to Dimitri and said: "Whither are Orestes and Pedalion going now? Home, I suppose, to talk about love. Well, let US go and see my dear Auntie. That will be far more entertaining than your sour company."

"How dare you speak like that, and laugh at us?" I burst out as I approached him with clenched fists. "How dare you laugh at feelings which you do not understand? I will not have you do it! Hold your tongue!" At this point I had to hold my own, for I did not know what to say next, and was, moreover, out of breath with excitement. At first Dubkoff was taken aback, but presently he tried to laugh it off, and to take it as a joke. Finally I was surprised to see him look crestfallen, and lower his eyes.

"I NEVER laugh at you or your feelings. It is merely my way of speaking," he said evasively.

"Indeed?" I cried; yet the next moment I felt ashamed of myself and sorry for him, since his flushed, downcast face had in it no other expression than one of genuine pain.

"What is the matter with you?" said Woloda and Dimitri simultaneously.

"No one was trying to insult you."

"Yes, he DID try to insult me!" I replied.

"What an extraordinary fellow your brother is!" said Dubkoff to Woloda. At that moment he was passing out of the door, and could not have heard what I said. Possibly I should have flung myself after him and offered him further insult, had it not been that just at that moment the waiter who had witnessed my encounter with Kolpikoff handed me my greatcoat, and I at once quietened down--merely making such a pretence of having had a difference with Dimitri as was necessary to make my sudden appeasement appear nothing extraordinary. Next day, when I met Dubkoff at Woloda's, the quarrel was not raked up, yet he and I still addressed each other as "you," and found it harder than ever to look one another in the face.

The remembrance of my scene with Kolpikoff--who, by the way, never

sent me "de ses nouvelles," either the following day or any day afterwards--remained for years a keen and unpleasant memory. Even so much as five years after it had happened I would begin fidgeting and muttering to myself whenever I remembered the unavenged insult, and was fain to comfort myself with the satisfaction of recollecting the sort of young fellow I had shown myself to be in my subsequent affair with Dubkoff. In fact, it was only later still that I began to regard the matter in another light, and both to recall with comic appreciation my passage of arms with Kolpikoff, and to regret the undeserved affront which I had offered my good friend Dubkoff.

When, at a later hour on the evening of the dinner, I told Dimitri of my affair with Kolpikoff, whose exterior I described in detail, he was astounded.

"That is the very man!" he cried. "Don't you know that this precious Kolpikoff is a known scamp and sharper, as well as, above all things, a coward, and that he was expelled from his regiment by his brother officers because, having had his face slapped, he would not fight? But how came you to let him get away?" he added, with a kindly smile and glance. "Surely he could not have said more to you than he did when he called you a cad?"

"No," I admitted with a blush.

"Well, it was not right, but there is no great harm done," said Dimitri

consolingly.

Long afterwards, when thinking the matter over at leisure, I suddenly came to the conclusion that it was quite possible that Kolpikoff took the opportunity of vicariously wiping off upon me the slap in the face which he had once received, just as I myself took the opportunity of vicariously wiping off upon the innocent Dubkoff the epithet "cad" which Kolpikoff had just applied to me.