

## XIX. THE KORNAKOFFS

MY second call on the route lay at the Kornakoffs', who lived on the first floor of a large mansion facing the Arbat. The staircase of the building looked extremely neat and orderly, yet in no way luxurious--being lined only with drugget pinned down with highly-polished brass rods. Nowhere were there any flowers or mirrors to be seen. The salon, too, with its polished floor, which I traversed on my way to the drawing-room, was decorated in the same cold, severe, unostentatious style. Everything in it looked bright and solid, but not new, and pictures, flower-stands, and articles of bric-a-brac were wholly absent. In the drawing-room I found some of the young princesses seated, but seated with the sort of correct, "company" air about them which gave one the impression that they sat like that only when guests were expected.

"Mamma will be here presently," the eldest of them said to me as she seated herself by my side. For the next quarter of an hour, this young lady entertained me with such an easy flow of small-talk that the conversation never flagged a moment. Yet somehow she made so patent the fact that she was just entertaining me that I felt not altogether pleased. Amongst other things, she told me that their brother Stephen (whom they called Etienne, and who had been two years at the College of Cadets) had now received his commission. Whenever she spoke of him, and more particularly when she told me that he had flouted his mother's wishes by entering the Hussars, she assumed a nervous air,

and immediately her sisters, sitting there in silence, also assumed a nervous air. When, again, she spoke of my grandmother's death, she assumed a MOURNFUL air, and immediately the others all did the same. Finally, when she recalled how I had once struck St. Jerome and been expelled from the room, she laughed and showed her bad teeth, and immediately all the other princesses laughed and showed their bad teeth too.

Next, the Princess-Mother herself entered--a little dried-up woman, with a wandering glance and a habit of always looking at somebody else when she was addressing one. Taking my hand, she raised her own to my lips for me to kiss it--which otherwise, not supposing it to be necessary, I should not have done.

"How pleased I am to see you!" she said with her usual clearness of articulation as she gazed at her daughters. "And how like your mother you look! Does he not, Lise?"

Lise assented, though I knew for a fact that I did not resemble my mother in the least.

"And what a grown-up you have become! My Etienne, you will remember, is your second cousin. No, not second cousin--what is it, Lise? My mother was Barbara Dimitrievna, daughter of Dimitri Nicolaevitch, and your grandmother was Natalia Nicolaevna."

"Then he is our THIRD cousin, Mamma," said the eldest girl.

"Oh, how you always confuse me!" was her mother's angry reply. "Not third cousin, but COUSIN GERMAN--that is your relationship to Etienne. He is an officer now. Did you know it? It is not well that he should have his own way too much. You young men need keeping in hand, or--! Well, you are not vexed because your old aunt tells you the plain truth? I always kept Etienne strictly in hand, for I found it necessary to do so."

"Yes, that is how our relationship stands," she went on. "Prince Ivan Ivanovitch is my uncle, and your late mother's uncle also. Consequently I must have been your mother's first cousin--no, second cousin. Yes, that is it. Tell me, have you been to call on Prince Ivan yet?"

I said no, but that I was just going to.

"Ah, is it possible?" she cried. "Why, you ought to have paid him the first call of all! Surely you know that he stands to you in the position of a father? He has no children of his own, and his only heirs are yourself and my children. You ought to pay him all possible deference, both because of his age, and because of his position in the world, and because of everything else. I know that you young fellows of the present day think nothing of relationships and are not fond of old men, yet do you listen to me, your old aunt, for I am fond of you, and was fond of your mother, and had a great--a very great-liking and respect for your

grandmother. You must not fail to call upon him on any account."

I said that I would certainly go, and since my present call seemed to me to have lasted long enough, I rose, and was about to depart, but she restrained me.

"No, wait a minute," she cried. "Where is your father, Lise? Go and tell him to come here. He will be so glad to see you," she added, turning to me.

Two minutes later Prince Michael entered. He was a short, thick-set gentleman, very slovenly dressed and ill-shaven, yet wearing such an air of indifference that he looked almost a fool. He was not in the least glad to see me--at all events he did not intimate that he was; but the Princess (who appeared to stand in considerable awe of him) hastened to say:

"Is not Woldemar here" (she seemed to have forgotten my name) "exactly like his mother?" and she gave her husband a glance which forced him to guess what she wanted. Accordingly he approached me with his usual passionless, half-discontented expression, and held out to me an unshaven cheek to kiss.

"Why, you are not dressed yet, though you have to go out soon!" was the Princess's next remark to him in the angry tone which she habitually employed in conversation with her domestics. "It will only mean your

offending some one again, and trying to set people against you."

"In a moment, in a moment, mother," said Prince Michael, and departed. I also made my bows and departed.

This was the first time I had heard of our being related to Prince Ivan Ivanovitch, and the news struck me unpleasantly.