

XX. THE IWINS

As for the prospect of my call upon the Prince, it seemed even more unpleasant. However, the order of my route took me first to the Iwins, who lived in a large and splendid mansion in Tverskaia Street. It was not without some nervousness that I entered the great portico where a Swiss major-domo stood armed with his staff of office.

To my inquiry as to whether any one was at home he replied: "Whom do you wish to see, sir? The General's son is within."

"And the General himself?" I asked with forced assurance.

"I must report to him your business first. What may it be, sir?" said the major-domo as he rang a bell. Immediately the gaitered legs of a footman showed themselves on the staircase above; whereupon I was seized with such a fit of nervousness that I hastily bid the lacquey say nothing about my presence to the General, since I would first see his son. By the time I had reached the top of the long staircase, I seemed to have grown extremely small (metaphorically, I mean, not actually), and had very much the same feeling within me as had possessed my soul when my drozhki drew up to the great portico, namely, a feeling as though drozhki, horse, and coachman had all of them grown extremely small too. I found the General's son lying asleep on a sofa, with an open book before him. His tutor, Monsieur Frost, under whose care he still pursued his studies at home, had entered behind me with a sort

of boyish tread, and now awoke his pupil. Iwin evinced no particular pleasure at seeing me, while I also seemed to notice that, while talking to me, he kept looking at my eyebrows. Although he was perfectly polite, I conceived that he was "entertaining" me much as the Princess Valakhin had done, and that he not only felt no particular liking for me, but even that he considered my acquaintance in no way necessary to one who possessed his own circle of friends. All this arose out of the idea that he was regarding my eyebrows. In short, his bearing towards me appeared to be (as I recognised with an awkward sensation) very much the same as my own towards Ilinka Grap. I began to feel irritated, and to interpret every fleeting glance which he cast at Monsieur Frost as a mute inquiry: "Why has this fellow come to see me?"

After some conversation he remarked that his father and mother were at home. Would I not like to visit them too?

"First I will go and dress myself," he added as he departed to another room, notwithstanding that he had seemed to be perfectly well dressed (in a new frockcoat and white waistcoat) in the present one. A few minutes later he reappeared in his University uniform, buttoned up to the chin, and we went downstairs together. The reception rooms through which we passed were lofty and of great size, and seemed to be richly furnished with marble and gilt ornaments, chintz-covered settees, and a number of mirrors. Presently Madame Iwin met us, and we went into a little room behind the drawing-room, where, welcoming me in very friendly fashion, she seated herself by my side, and began to inquire

after my relations.

Closer acquaintance with Madame (whom I had seen only twice before, and that but for a moment on each occasion) impressed me favourably. She was tall, thin, and very pale, and looked as though she suffered from chronic depression and fatigue. Yet, though her smile was a sad one, it was very kind, and her large, mournful eyes, with a slight cast in their vision, added to the pathos and attractiveness of her expression. Her attitude, while not precisely that of a hunchback, made her whole form droop, while her every movement expressed languor. Likewise, though her speech was deliberate, the timbre of her voice, and the manner in which she lisped her r's and l's, were very pleasing to the ear. Finally, she did not "ENTERTAIN" me. Unfortunately, the answers which I returned to her questions concerning my relations seemed to afford her a painful interest, and to remind her of happier days: with the result that when, presently, her son left the room, she gazed at me in silence for a moment, and then burst into tears. As I sat there in mute bewilderment, I could not conceive what I had said to bring this about. At first I felt sorry for her as she sat there weeping with downcast eyes. Next I began to think to myself: "Ought I not to try and comfort her, and how ought that to be done?" Finally, I began to feel vexed with her for placing me in such an awkward position. "Surely my appearance is not so moving as all that?" I reflected. "Or is she merely acting like this to see what I shall do under the circumstances?"

"Yet it would not do for me to go," I continued to myself, "for that

would look too much as though I were fleeing to escape her tears."

Accordingly I began fidgeting about on my seat, in order to remind her of my presence.

"Oh, how foolish of me!" at length she said, as she gazed at me for a moment and tried to smile. "There are days when one weeps for no reason whatever." She felt about for her handkerchief, and then burst out weeping more violently than before.

"Oh dear! How silly of me to be for ever crying like this! Yet I was so fond of your mother! We were such friends! We-we--"

At this point she found her handkerchief, and, burying her face in it, went on crying. Once more I found myself in the same protracted dilemma. Though vexed, I felt sorry for her, since her tears appeared to be genuine--even though I also had an idea that it was not so much for my mother that she was weeping as for the fact that she was unhappy, and had known happier days. How it would all have ended I do not know, had not her son reappeared and said that his father desired to see her. Thereupon she rose, and was just about to leave the room, when the General himself entered. He was a small, grizzled, thick-set man, with bushy black eyebrows, a grey, close-cropped head, and a very stern, haughty expression of countenance.

I rose and bowed to him, but the General (who was wearing three stars on his green frockcoat) not only made no response to my salutation, but

scarcely even looked at me; so that all at once I felt as though I were not a human being at all, but only some negligible object such as a settee or window; or, if I were a human being, as though I were quite indistinguishable from such a negligible object.

"Then you have not yet written to the Countess, my dear?" he said to his wife in French, and with an imperturbable, yet determined, expression on his countenance.

"Good-bye, Monsieur Irtenieff," Madame said to me, in her turn, as she made a proud gesture with her head and looked at my eyebrows just as her son had done. I bowed to her, and again to her husband, but my second salutation made no more impression upon him than if a window had just been opened or closed. Nevertheless the younger Iwin accompanied me to the door, and on the way told me that he was to go to St. Petersburg University, since his father had been appointed to a post in that city (and young Iwin named a very high office in the service).

"Well, his Papa may do whatsoever he likes," I muttered to myself as I climbed into the drozhki, "but at all events I will never set foot in that house again. His wife weeps and looks at me as though I were the embodiment of woe, while that old pig of a General does not even give me a bow. However, I will get even with him some day." How I meant to do that I do not know, but my words nevertheless came true.

Afterwards, I frequently found it necessary to remember the advice of

my father when he said that I must cultivate the acquaintanceship of the Iwins, and not expect a man in the position of General Iwin to pay any attention to a boy like myself. But I had figured in that position long enough.