

## XXII. INTIMATE CONVERSATION WITH MY FRIEND

THIS conversation of ours took place in a phaeton on the way to Kuntsevo. Dimitri had invited me in the morning to go with him to his mother's, and had called for me after luncheon; the idea being that I should spend the evening, and perhaps also pass the night, at the country-house where his family lived. Only when we had left the city and exchanged its grimy streets and the unbearably deafening clatter of its pavements for the open vista of fields and the subdued grinding of carriage-wheels on a dusty high road (while the sweet spring air and prospect enveloped us on every side) did I awake from the new impressions and sensations of freedom into which the past two days had plunged me. Dimitri was in his kind and sociable mood. That is to say, he was neither frowning nor blinking nervously nor straightening his neck in his collar. For my own part, I was congratulating myself on those noble sentiments which I have expressed above, in the belief that they had led him to overlook my shameful encounter with Kolpikoff, and to refrain from despising me for it. Thus we talked together on many an intimate subject which even a friend seldom mentions to a friend. He told me about his family whose acquaintance I had not yet made--about his mother, his aunt, and his sister, as also about her whom Woloda and Dubkoff believed to be his "flame," and always spoke of as "the lady with the chestnut locks." Of his mother he spoke with a certain cold and formal commendation, as though to forestall any further mention of her; his aunt he extolled enthusiastically, though with a touch of condescension in his tone; his sister he scarcely mentioned at all, as

though averse to doing so in my presence; but on the subject of "the lady with the chestnut locks" (whose real name was Lubov Sergievna, and who was a grown-up young lady living on a family footing with the Nechcludoffs) he discoursed with animation.

"Yes, she is a wonderful woman," he said with a conscious reddening of the face, yet looking me in the eyes with dogged temerity. "True, she is no longer young, and even rather elderly, as well as by no means good-looking; but as for loving a mere featherhead, a mere beauty--well, I never could understand that, for it is such a silly thing to do."

(Dimitri said this as though he had just discovered a most novel and extraordinary truth.) "I am certain, too, that such a soul, such a heart and principles, as are hers are not to be found elsewhere in the world of the present day." (I do not know whence he had derived the habit of saying that few good things were discoverable in the world of the present day, but at all events he loved to repeat the expression, and it somehow suited him.)

"Only, I am afraid," he went on quietly, after thus annihilating all such men as were foolish enough to admire mere beauty, "I am afraid that you will not understand or realise her quickly. She is modest, even secretive, and by no means fond of exhibiting her beautiful and surprising qualities. Now, my mother--who, as you will see, is a noble, sensible woman--has known Lubov Sergievna, for many years; yet even to this day she does not properly understand her. Shall I tell you why I was out of temper last evening when you were questioning me? Well, you

must know that the day before yesterday Lubov asked me to accompany her to Ivan Yakovlevitch's (you have heard of him, I suppose? the fellow who seems to be mad, but who, in reality, is a very remarkable man). Well, Lubov is extremely religious, and understands Ivan Yakovlevitch to the full. She often goes to see him, and converses with him, and gives him money for the poor--money which she has earned herself. She is a marvellous woman, as you will see. Well, I went with her to Ivan's, and felt very grateful to her for having afforded me the opportunity of exchanging a word with so remarkable a man; but my mother could not understand our action at all, and discerned in it only superstition. Consequently, last night she and I quarrelled for the first time in our lives. A very bitter one it was, too," he concluded, with a convulsive shrug of his shoulders, as though the mention of it recalled the feelings which he had then experienced.

"And what are your intentions about it all?" I inquired, to divert him from such a disagreeable recollection. "That is to say, how do you imagine it is going to turn out? Do you ever speak to her about the future, or about how your love or friendship are going to end?"

"Do you mean, do I intend to marry her eventually?" he inquired, in his turn, with a renewed blush, but turning himself round and looking me boldly in the face.

"Yes, certainly," I replied as I settled myself down. "We are both of us grown-up, as well as friends, so we may as well discuss our future life

as we drive along. No one could very well overlook or overhear us now."

"Why should I NOT marry her?" he went on in response to my reassuring reply. "It is my aim--as it should be the aim of every honourable man--to be as good and as happy as possible; and with her, if she should still be willing when I have become more independent, I should be happier and better than with the greatest beauty in the world."

Absorbed in such conversation, we hardly noticed that we were approaching Kuntsevo, or that the sky was becoming overcast and beginning to threaten rain. On the right, the sun was slowly sinking behind the ancient trees of the Kuntsevo park--one half of its brilliant disc obscured with grey, subluminous cloud, and the other half sending forth spokes of flaming light which threw the old trees into striking relief as they stood there with their dense crowns of green showing against a blue patch of sky. The light and shimmer of that patch contrasted sharply with the heavy pink cloud which lay massed above a young birch-tree visible on the horizon before us, while, a little further to the right, the parti-coloured roofs of the Kuntsevo mansion could be seen projecting above a belt of trees and undergrowth--one side of them reflecting the glittering rays of the sun, and the other side harmonising with the more lowering portion of the heavens. Below us, and to the left, showed the still blue of a pond where it lay surrounded with pale-green laburnums--its dull, concave-looking depths repeating the trees in more sombre shades of colour over the surface of a hillock. Beyond the water spread the black expanse of a ploughed field, with the

straight line of a dark-green ridge by which it was bisected running far into the distance, and there joining the leaden, threatening horizon.

On either side of the soft road along which the phaeton was pursuing the even tenour of its way, bright-green, tangled, juicy belts of rye were sprouting here and there into stalk. Not a motion was perceptible in the air, only a sweet freshness, and everything looked extraordinarily clear and bright. Near the road I could see a little brown path winding its way among the dark-green, quarter-grown stems of rye, and somehow that path reminded me vividly of our village, and somehow (through some connection of thought) the idea of that village reminded me vividly of Sonetchka, and so of the fact that I was in love with her.

Notwithstanding my fondness for Dimitri and the pleasure which his frankness had afforded me, I now felt as though I desired to hear no more about his feelings and intentions with regard to Lubov Sergievna, but to talk unstintedly about my own love for Sonetchka, who seemed to me an object of affection of a far higher order. Yet for some reason or another I could not make up my mind to tell him straight out how splendid it would seem when I had married Sonetchka and we were living in the country--of how we should have little children who would crawl about the floor and call me Papa, and of how delighted I should be when he, Dimitri, brought his wife, Lubov Sergievna, to see us, wearing an expensive gown. Accordingly, instead of saying all that, I pointed to the setting sun, and merely remarked: "Look, Dimitri! How splendid!"

To this, however, Dimitri made no reply, since he was evidently dissatisfied at my answering his confession (which it had cost him much to make) by directing his attention to natural objects (to which he was, in general, indifferent). Upon him Nature had an effect altogether different to what she had upon myself, for she affected him rather by her industry than by her beauty--he loved her rather with his intellect than with his senses.

"I am absolutely happy," I went on, without noticing that he was altogether taken up with his own thoughts and oblivious of anything that I might be saying. "You will remember how I told you about a girl with whom I used to be in love when I was a little boy? Well, I saw her again only this morning, and am now infatuated with her." Then I told him--despite his continued expression of indifference--about my love, and about all my plans for my future connubial happiness. Strangely enough, no sooner had I related in detail the whole strength of my feelings than I instantly became conscious of its diminution.

The rain overtook us just as we were turning into the avenue of birch-trees which led to the house, but it did not really wet us. I only knew that it was raining by the fact that I felt a drop fall, first on my nose, and then on my hand, and heard something begin to patter upon the young, viscous leaves of the birch-trees as, drooping their curly branches overhead, they seemed to imbibe the pure, shining drops with an avidity which filled the whole avenue with scent. We descended from the carriage, so as to reach the house the quicker through the garden, but

found ourselves confronted at the entrance-door by four ladies, two of whom were knitting, one reading a book, and the fourth walking to and fro with a little dog. Thereupon, Dimitri began to present me to his mother, sister, and aunt, as well as to Lubov Sergievna. For a moment they remained where they were, but almost instantly the rain became heavier.

"Let us go into the verandah; you can present him to us there," said the lady whom I took to be Dimitri's mother, and we all of us ascended the entrance-steps.