

XXVI. I SHOW OFF

AT tea time the reading came to an end, and the ladies began to talk among themselves of persons and things unknown to me. This I conceived them to be doing on purpose to make me conscious (for all their kind demeanour) of the difference which years and position in the world had set between them and myself. In general discussions, however, in which I could take part I sought to atone for my late silence by exhibiting that extraordinary cleverness and originality to which I felt compelled by my University uniform. For instance, when the conversation turned upon country houses, I said that Prince Ivan Ivanovitch had a villa near Moscow which people came to see even from London and Paris, and that it contained balustrading which had cost 380,000 roubles. Likewise, I remarked that the Prince was a very near relation of mine, and that, when lunching with him the same day, he had invited me to go and spend the entire summer with him at that villa, but that I had declined, since I knew the villa well, and had stayed in it more than once, and that all those balustradings and bridges did not interest me, since I could not bear ornamental work, especially in the country, where I liked everything to be wholly countrified. After delivering myself of this extraordinary and complicated romance, I grew confused, and blushed so much that every one must have seen that I was lying. Both Varenika, who was handing me a cup of tea, and Sophia Ivanovna, who had been gazing at me throughout, turned their heads away, and began to talk of something else with an expression which I afterwards learnt that good-natured people assume when a very young man has told them a manifest string of

lies--an expression which says, "Yes, we know he is lying, and why he is doing it, the poor young fellow!"

What I had said about Prince Ivan Ivanovitch having a country villa, I had related simply because I could find no other pretext for mentioning both my relationship to the Prince and the fact that I had been to luncheon with him that day; yet why I had said all I had about the balustrading costing 380,000 roubles, and about my having several times visited the Prince at that villa (I had never once been there--more especially since the Prince possessed no residences save in Moscow and Naples, as the Nechludoffs very well knew), I could not possibly tell you. Neither in childhood nor in adolescence nor in riper years did I ever remark in myself the vice of falsehood--on the contrary, I was, if anything, too outspoken and truthful. Yet, during this first stage of my manhood, I often found myself seized with a strange and unreasonable tendency to lie in the most desperate fashion. I say advisedly "in the most desperate fashion," for the reason that I lied in matters in which it was the easiest thing in the world to detect me. On the whole I think that a vain-glorious desire to appear different from what I was, combined with an impossible hope that the lie would never be found out, was the chief cause of this extraordinary impulse.

After tea, since the rain had stopped and the after-glow of sunset was calm and clear, the Princess proposed that we should go and stroll in the lower garden, and admire her favourite spots there. Following my rule to be always original, and conceiving that clever people like

myself and the Princess must surely be above the banalities of politeness, I replied that I could not bear a walk with no object in view, and that, if I DID walk, I liked to walk alone. I had no idea that this speech was simply rude; all I thought was that, even as nothing could be more futile than empty compliments, so nothing could be more pleasing and original than a little frank brusquerie. However, though much pleased with my answer, I set out with the rest of the company.

The Princess's favourite spot of all was at the very bottom of the lower garden, where a little bridge spanned a narrow piece of swamp. The view there was very restricted, yet very intimate and pleasing. We are so accustomed to confound art with nature that, often enough, phenomena of nature which are never to be met with in pictures seem to us unreal, and give us the impression that nature is unnatural, or vice versa; whereas phenomena of nature which occur with too much frequency in pictures seem to us hackneyed, and views which are to be met with in real life, but which appear to us too penetrated with a single idea or a single sentiment, seem to us arabesques. The view from the Princess's favourite spot was as follows. On the further side of a small lake, over-grown with weeds round its edges, rose a steep ascent covered with bushes and with huge old trees of many shades of green, while, overhanging the lake at the foot of the ascent, stood an ancient birch tree which, though partly supported by stout roots implanted in the marshy bank of the lake, rested its crown upon a tall, straight poplar, and dangled its curved branches over the smooth surface of the pond--both branches and the surrounding greenery being reflected therein as in a mirror.

"How lovely!" said the Princess with a nod of her head, and addressing no one in particular.

"Yes, marvellous!" I replied in my desire to show that had an opinion of my own on every subject. "Yet somehow it all looks to me so terribly like a scheme of decoration."

The Princess went on gazing at the scene as though she had not heard me, and turning to her sister and Lubov Sergievna at intervals, in order to point out to them its details--especially a curved, pendent bough, with its reflection in the water, which particularly pleased her. Sophia Ivanovna observed to me that it was all very beautiful, and that she and her sister would sometimes spend hours together at this spot; yet it was clear that her remarks were meant merely to please the Princess. I have noticed that people who are gifted with the faculty of loving are seldom receptive to the beauties of nature. Lubov Sergievna also seemed enraptured, and asked (among other things), "How does that birch tree manage to support itself? Has it stood there long?" Yet the next moment she became absorbed in contemplation of her little dog Susetka, which, with its stumpy paws pattering to and fro upon the bridge in a mincing fashion, seemed to say by the expression of its face that this was the first time it had ever found itself out of doors. As for Dimitri, he fell to discoursing very logically to his mother on the subject of how no view can be beautiful of which the horizon is limited. Varenika alone said nothing. Glancing at her, I saw that she was leaning over

the parapet of the bridge, her profile turned towards me, and gazing straight in front of her. Something seemed to be interesting her deeply, or even affecting her, since it was clear that she was oblivious to her surroundings, and thinking neither of herself nor of the fact that any one might be regarding her. In the expression of her large eyes there was nothing but wrapt attention and quiet, concentrated thought, while her whole attitude seemed so unconstrained and, for all her shortness, so dignified that once more some recollection or another touched me and once more I asked myself, "Is IT, then, beginning?" Yet again I assured myself that I was already in love with Sonetchka, and that Varenika was only an ordinary girl, the sister of my friend. Though she pleased me at that moment, I somehow felt a vague desire to show her, by word or deed, some small unfriendliness.

"I tell you what, Dimitri," I said to my friend as I moved nearer to Varenika, so that she might overhear what I was going to say, "it seems to me that, even if there had been no mosquitos here, there would have been nothing to commend this spot; whereas "--and here I slapped my cheek, and in very truth annihilated one of those insects--"it is simply awful."

"Then you do not care for nature?" said Varenika without turning her head.

"I think it a foolish, futile pursuit," I replied, well satisfied that I had said something to annoy her, as well as something original. Varenika

only raised her eyebrows a little, with an expression of pity, and went on gazing in front of her as calmly as before.

I felt vexed with her. Yet, for all that, the rusty, paint-blistered parapet on which she was leaning, the way in which the dark waters of the pond reflected the drooping branch of the overhanging birch tree (it almost seemed to me as though branch and its reflection met), the rising odour of the swamp, the feeling of crushed mosquito on my cheek, and her absorbed look and statuesque pose--many times afterwards did these things recur with unexpected vividness to my recollection.