

XXVII. DIMITRI

WHEN we returned to the house from our stroll, Varenika declined to sing as she usually did in the evenings, and I was conceited enough to attribute this to my doing, in the belief that its reason lay in what I had said on the bridge. The Nechludoffs never had supper, and went to bed early, while to-night, since Dimitri had the toothache (as Sophia Ivanovna had foretold), he departed with me to his room even earlier than usual. Feeling that I had done all that was required of me by my blue collar and gilt buttons, and that every one was very pleased with me, I was in a gratified, complacent mood, while Dimitri, on the other hand, was rendered by his quarrel with his sister and the toothache both taciturn and gloomy. He sat down at the table, got out a couple of notebooks--a diary and the copy-book in which it was his custom every evening to inscribe the tasks performed by or awaiting him--and, continually frowning and touching his cheek with his hand, continued writing for a while.

"Oh, DO leave me alone!" he cried to the maid whom Sophia Ivanovna sent to ask him whether his teeth were still hurting him, and whether he would not like to have a poultice made. Then, saying that my bed would soon be ready for me and that he would be back presently, he departed to Lubov Sergievna's room.

"What a pity that Varenika is not good-looking and, in general, Sonetchka!" I reflected when I found myself alone. "How nice it would be

if, after I have left the University, I could go to her and offer her my hand! I would say to her, 'Princess, though no longer young, and therefore unable to love passionately, I will cherish you as a dear sister. And you,' I would continue to her mother, 'I greatly respect; and you, Sophia Ivanovna, I value highly. Therefore say to me, Varenika (since I ask you to be my wife), just the simple and direct word YES.' And she would give me her hand, and I should press it, and say, 'Mine is a love which depends not upon words, but upon deeds.' And suppose," next came into my head, "that Dimitri should suddenly fall in love with Lubotshka (as Lubotshka has already done with him), and should desire to marry her? Then either one or the other of us would have to resign all thought of marriage. Well, it would be splendid, for in that case I should act thus. As soon as I had noticed how things were, I should make no remark, but go to Dimitri and say, 'It is no use, my friend, for you and I to conceal our feelings from one another. You know that my love for your sister will terminate only with my life. Yet I know all; and though you have deprived me of all hope, and have rendered me an unhappy man, so that Nicolas Irtenieff will have to bewail his misery for the rest of his existence, yet do you take my sister,' and I should lay his hand in Lubotshka's. Then he would say to me, 'No, not for all the world!' and I should reply, 'Prince Nechludoff, it is in vain for you to attempt to outdo me in nobility. Not in the whole world does there exist a more magnanimous being than Nicolas Irtenieff.' Then I should salute him and depart. In tears Dimitri and Lubotshka would pursue me, and entreat me to accept their sacrifice, and I should consent to do so, and, perhaps, be happy ever afterwards--if only I were in love with

Varenika." These fancies tickled my imagination so pleasantly that I felt as though I should like to communicate them to my friend; yet, despite our mutual vow of frankness, I also felt as though I had not the physical energy to do so.

Dimitri returned from Lubov Sergievna's room with some toothache capsules which she had given him, yet in even greater pain, and therefore in even greater depression, than before. Evidently no bedroom had yet been prepared for me, for presently the boy who acted as Dimitri's valet arrived to ask him where I was to sleep.

"Oh, go to the devil!" cried Dimitri, stamping his foot. "Vasika, Vasika, Vasika!" he went on, the instant that the boy had left the room, with a gradual raising of his voice at each repetition. "Vasika, lay me out a bed on the floor."

"No, let ME sleep on the floor," I objected.

"Well, it is all one. Lie anywhere you like," continued Dimitri in the same angry tone. "Vasika, why don't you go and do what I tell you?"

Evidently Vasika did not understand what was demanded of him, for he remained where he was.

"What is the matter with you? Go and lay the bed, Vasika, I tell you!" shouted Dimitri, suddenly bursting into a sort of frenzy; yet Vasika

still did not understand, but, blushing hotly, stood motionless.

"So you are determined to drive me mad, are you?"--and leaping from his chair and rushing upon the boy, Dimitri struck him on the head with the whole weight of his fist, until the boy rushed headlong from the room. Halting in the doorway, Dimitri glanced at me, and the expression of fury and pain which had sat for a moment on his countenance suddenly gave place to such a boyish, kindly, affectionate, yet ashamed, expression that I felt sorry for him, and reconsidered my intention of leaving him to himself. He said nothing, but for a long time paced the room in silence, occasionally glancing at me with the same deprecatory expression as before. Then he took his notebook from the table, wrote something in it, took off his jacket and folded it carefully, and, stepping into the corner where the ikon hung, knelt down and began to say his prayers, with his large white hands folded upon his breast. So long did he pray that Vasika had time to bring a mattress and spread it, under my whispered directions, on the floor. Indeed, I had undressed and laid myself down upon the mattress before Dimitri had finished. As I contemplated his slightly rounded back and the soles of his feet (which somehow seemed to stick out in my direction in a sort of repentant fashion whenever he made his obeisances), I felt that I liked him more than ever, and debated within myself whether or not I should tell him all I had been fancying concerning our respective sisters. When he had finished his prayers, he lay down upon the bed near me, and, propping himself upon his elbow, looked at me in silence, with a kindly, yet abashed, expression. Evidently he found it difficult to do this, yet

meant thus to punish himself. Then I smiled and returned his gaze, and he smiled back at me.

"Why do you not tell me that my conduct has been abominable?" he said. "You have been thinking so, have you not?"

"Yes," I replied; and although it was something quite different which had been in my mind, it now seemed to me that that was what I had been thinking. "Yes, it was not right of you, nor should I have expected it of you." It pleased me particularly at that moment to call him by the familiar second person singular. "But how are your teeth now?" I added.

"Oh, much better. Nicolinka, my friend," he went on, and so feelingly that it sounded as though tears were standing in his eyes, "I know and feel that I am bad, but God sees how I try to be better, and how I entreat Him to make me so. Yet what am I to do with such an unfortunate, horrible nature as mine? What am I to do with it? I try to keep myself in hand and to rule myself, but suddenly it becomes impossible for me to do so--at all events, impossible for me to do so unaided. I need the help and support of some one. Now, there is Lubov Sergievna; SHE understands me, and could help me in this, and I know by my notebook that I have greatly improved in this respect during the past year.

Ah, my dear Nicolinka"--he spoke with the most unusual and unwonted tenderness, and in a tone which had grown calmer now that he had made his confession--"how much the influence of a woman like Lubov could do for me! Think how good it would be for me if I could have a friend like

her to live with when I have become independent! With her I should be another man."

And upon that Dimitri began to unfold to me his plans for marriage, for a life in the country, and for continual self-discipline.

"Yes, I will live in the country," he said, "and you shall come to see me when you have married Sonetchka. Our children shall play together. All this may seem to you stupid and ridiculous, yet it may very well come to pass."

"Yes, it very well may" I replied with a smile, yet thinking how much nicer it would be if I married his sister.

"I tell you what," he went on presently; "you only imagine yourself to be in love with Sonetchka, whereas I can see that it is all rubbish, and that you do not really know what love means."

I did not protest, for, in truth, I almost agreed with him, and for a while we lay without speaking.

"Probably you have noticed that I have been in my old bad humour today, and have had a nasty quarrel with Varia?" he resumed. "I felt bad about it afterwards--more particularly since it occurred in your presence.

Although she thinks wrongly on some subjects, she is a splendid girl and very good, as you will soon recognise."

His quick transition from mention of my love affairs to praise of his sister pleased me extremely, and made me blush, but I nevertheless said nothing more about his sister, and we went on talking of other things.

Thus we chattered until the cocks had crowed twice. In fact, the pale dawn was already looking in at the window when at last Dimitri lay down upon his bed and put out the candle.

"Well, now for sleep," he said.

"Yes," I replied, "but--"

"But what?"

"Now nice it is to be alive in the daylight!"

"Yes, it IS a splendid thing!" he replied in a voice which, even in the darkness, enabled me to see the expression of his cheerful, kindly eyes and boyish smile.