

XXXVI. THE UNIVERSITY

THE wedding was to take place in two weeks' time, but, as our lectures had begun already, Woloda and myself were forced to return to Moscow at the beginning of September. The Nechludoffs had also returned from the country, and Dimitri (with whom, on parting, I had made an agreement that we should correspond frequently with the result, of course, that we had never once written to one another) came to see us immediately after our arrival, and arranged to escort me to my first lecture on the morrow.

It was a beautiful sunny day. No sooner had I entered the auditorium than I felt my personality entirely disappear amid the swarm of light-hearted youths who were seething tumultuously through every doorway and corridor under the influence of the sunlight pouring through the great windows. I found the sense of being a member of this huge community very pleasing, yet there were few among the throng whom I knew, and that only on terms of a nod and a "How do you do, Irtenieff?"

All around me men were shaking hands and chatting together--from every side came expressions of friendship, laughter, jests, and badinage. Everywhere I could feel the tie which bound this youthful society in one, and everywhere, too, I could feel that it left me out. Yet this impression lasted for a moment only, and was succeeded, together with the vexation which it had caused, by the idea that it was best that I should not belong to that society, but keep to my own circle of

gentlemen; wherefore I proceeded to seat myself upon the third bench, with, as neighbours, Count B., Baron Z., the Prince R., Iwin, and some other young men of the same class with none of whom, however, was acquainted save with Iwin and Count B. Yet the look which these young gentlemen threw at me at once made me feel that I was not of their set, and I turned to observe what was going on around me. Semenoff, with grey, matted hair, white teeth, and tunic flying open, was seated a little distance off, and leaning forward on his elbows as he nibbled a pen, while the gymnasium student who had come out first in the examinations had established himself on the front bench, and, with a black stock coming half-way up his cheek, was toying with the silver watch-chain which adorned his satin waistcoat. On a bench in a raised part of the hall I could descry Ikonin (evidently he had contrived to enter the University somehow!), and hear him fussily proclaiming, in all the glory of blue piped trousers which completely hid his boots, that he was now seated on Parnassus. Ilinka--who had surprised me by giving me a bow not only cold, but supercilious, as though to remind me that here we were all equals--was just in front of me, with his legs resting in free and easy style on another bench (a hit, somehow I thought, at myself), and conversing with a student as he threw occasional glances in my direction. Iwin's set by my side were talking in French, yet every word which I overheard of their conversation seemed to me both stupid and incorrect ("Ce n'est pas francais," I thought to myself), while all the attitudes, utterances, and doings of Semenoff, Ilinka, and the rest struck me as uniformly coarse, ungentlemanly, and "comme il ne faut pas."

Thus, attached to no particular set, I felt isolated and unable to make friends, and so grew resentful. One of the students on the bench in front of me kept biting his nails, which were raw to the quick already, and this so disgusted me that I edged away from him. In short, I remember finding my first day a most depressing affair.

When the professor entered, and there was a general stir and a cessation of chatter, I remember throwing a scornful glance at him, as also that he began his discourse with a sentence which I thought devoid of meaning. I had expected the lecture to be, from first to last, so clever that not a word ought to be taken from or added to it. Disappointed in this, I at once proceeded to draw beneath the heading "First Lecture" with which I had adorned my beautifully-bound notebook no less than eighteen faces in profile, joined together in a sort of chaplet, and only occasionally moved my hand along the page in order to give the professor (who, I felt sure, must be greatly interested in me) the impression that I was writing something. In fact, at this very first lecture I came to the decision which I maintained to the end of my course, namely, that it was unnecessary, and even stupid, to take down every word said by every professor.

At subsequent lectures, however, I did not feel my isolation so strongly, since I made several acquaintances and got into the way of shaking hands and entering into conversation. Yet for some reason or another no real intimacy ever sprang up between us, and I often found

myself depressed and only feigning cheerfulness. With the set which comprised Iwin and "the aristocrats," as they were generally known, I could not make any headway at all, for, as I now remember, I was always shy and churlish to them, and nodded to them only when they nodded to me; so that they had little inducement to desire my acquaintance. With most of the other students, however, this arose from quite a different cause. As soon as ever I discerned friendliness on the part of a comrade, I at once gave him to understand that I went to luncheon with Prince Ivan Ivanovitch and kept my own drozhki. All this I said merely to show myself in the most favourable light in his eyes, and to induce him to like me all the more; yet almost invariably the only result of my communicating to him the intelligence concerning the drozhki and my relationship to Prince Ivan Ivanovitch was that, to my astonishment, he at once adopted a cold and haughty bearing towards me.

Among us we had a Crown student named Operoff--a very modest, industrious, and clever young fellow, who always offered one his hand like a slab of wood (that is to say, without closing his fingers or making the slightest movement with them); with the result that his comrades often did the same to him in jest, and called it the "deal board" way of shaking hands. He and I nearly always sat next to one another, and discussed matters generally. In particular he pleased me with the freedom with which he would criticise the professors as he pointed out to me with great clearness and acumen the merits or demerits of their respective ways of teaching and made occasional fun of them. Such remarks I found exceedingly striking and diverting when uttered

in his quiet, mincing voice. Nevertheless he never let a lecture pass without taking careful notes of it in his fine handwriting, and eventually we decided to join forces, and to do our preparation together. Things had progressed to the point of his always looking pleased when I took my usual seat beside him when, unfortunately, I one day found it necessary to inform him that, before her death, my mother had besought my father never to allow us to enter for a government scholarship, as well as that I myself considered Crown students, no matter how clever, to be-"well, they are not GENTLEMEN," I concluded, though beginning to flounder a little and grow red. At the moment Operoff said nothing, but at subsequent lectures he ceased to greet me or to offer me his board-like hand, and never attempted to talk to me, but, as soon as ever I sat down, he would lean his head upon his arm, and purport to be absorbed in his notebooks. I was surprised at this sudden coolness, but looked upon it as *infra dig*, "*pour un jeune homme de bonne maison*" to curry favour with a mere Crown student of an Operoff, and so left him severely alone--though I confess that his aloofness hurt my feelings. On one occasion I arrived before him, and, since the lecture was to be delivered by a popular professor whom students came to hear who did not usually attend such functions, I found almost every seat occupied. Accordingly I secured Operoff's place for myself by spreading my notebooks on the desk before it; after which I left the room again for a moment. When I returned I perceived that my paraphernalia had been relegated to the bench behind, and the place taken by Operoff himself. I remarked to him that I had already secured it by placing my notebooks there.

"I know nothing about that," he replied sharply, yet without looking up at me.

"I tell you I placed my notebooks there," I repeated, purposely trying to bluster, in the hope of intimidating him. "Every one saw me do it," I added, including the students near me in my glance. Several of them looked at me with curiosity, yet none of them spoke.

"Seats cannot be booked here," said Operoff. "Whoever first sits down in a place keeps it," and, settling himself angrily where he was, he flashed at me a glance of defiance.

"Well, that only means that you are a cad," I said.

I have an idea that he murmured something about my being "a stupid young idiot," but I decided not to hear it. What would be the use, I asked myself, of my hearing it? That we should brawl like a couple of manants over less than nothing? (I was very fond of the word manants, and often used it for meeting awkward junctures.) Perhaps I should have said something more had not, at that moment, a door slammed and the professor (dressed in a blue frockcoat, and shuffling his feet as he walked) ascended the rostrum.

Nevertheless, when the examination was about to come on, and I had need of some one's notebooks, Operoff remembered his promise to lend me his,

and we did our preparation together.