

XXXIX. THE STUDENTS' FEAST

NOTWITHSTANDING that, as yet, Dimitri's influence had kept me from indulging in those customary students' festivities known as kutezhi or "wines," that winter saw me participate in such a function, and carry away with me a not over-pleasant impression of it. This is how it came about.

At a lecture soon after the New Year, Baron Z.--a tall, light-haired young fellow of very serious demeanour and regular features--invited us all to spend a sociable evening with him. By "us all", I mean all the men more or less "comme il faut", of our course, and exclusive of Grap, Semenoff, Operoff, and commoners of that sort. Woloda smiled contemptuously when he heard that I was going to a "wine" of first course men, but I looked to derive great and unusual pleasure from this, to me, novel method of passing the time. Accordingly, punctually at the appointed hour of eight I presented myself at the Baron's.

Our host, in an open tunic and white waistcoat, received his guests in the brilliantly lighted salon and drawing-room of the small mansion where his parents lived--they having given up their reception rooms to him for the evening for purposes of this party. In the corridor could be seen the heads and skirts of inquisitive domestics, while in the dining-room I caught a glimpse of a dress which I imagined to belong to the Baroness herself. The guests numbered a score, and were all of them students except Herr Frost (in attendance upon Iwin) and a tall,

red-faced gentleman who was superintending the feast and who was introduced to every one as a relative of the Baron's and a former student of the University of Dorpat. At first, the excessive brilliancy and formal appointments of the reception-rooms had such a chilling effect upon this youthful company that every one involuntarily hugged the walls, except a few bolder spirits and the ex-Dorpat student, who, with his waistcoat already unbuttoned, seemed to be in every room, and in every corner of every room, at once, and filled the whole place with his resonant, agreeable, never-ceasing tenor voice. The remainder of the guests preferred either to remain silent or to talk in discreet tones of professors, faculties, examinations, and other serious and interesting matters. Yet every one, without exception, kept watching the door of the dining-room, and, while trying to conceal the fact, wearing an expression which said: "Come! It is time to begin." I too felt that it was time to begin, and awaited the beginning with pleasurable impatience.

After footmen had handed round tea among the guests, the Dorpat student asked Frost in Russian:

"Can you make punch, Frost?"

"Oh ja!" replied Frost with a joyful flourish of his heels, and the other went on:

"Then do you set about it" (they addressed each other in the second

person singular, as former comrades at Dorpat). Frost accordingly departed to the dining-room, with great strides of his bowed, muscular legs, and, after some walking backwards and forwards, deposited upon the drawing-room table a large punchbowl, accompanied by a ten-pound sugar loaf supported on three students' swords placed crosswise. Meanwhile, the Baron had been going round among his guests as they sat regarding the punch-bowl, and addressing them, with a face of immutable gravity, in the formula: "I beg of you all to drink of this loving-cup in student fashion, that there may be good-fellowship among the members of our course. Unbutton your waistcoats, or take them off altogether, as you please." Already the Dorpat student had divested himself of his tunic and rolled up his white shirt-sleeves above his elbows, and now, planting his feet firmly apart, he proceeded to set fire to the rum in the punch-bowl.

"Gentlemen, put out the candles!" he cried with a sudden shout so loud and insistent that we seemed all of us to be shouting at once. However, we still went on silently regarding the punch-bowl and the white shirt of the Dorpat student, with a feeling that a moment of great solemnity was approaching.

"Put out the lights, Frost, I tell you!" the Dorpat student shouted again. Evidently the punch was now sufficiently burnt. Accordingly every one helped to extinguish the candles, until the room was in total darkness save for a spot where the white shirts and hands of the three students supporting the sugarloaf on their crossed swords were lit up by

the lurid flames from the bowl. Yet the Dorpat student's tenor voice was not the only one to be heard, for in different quarters of the room resounded chattering and laughter. Many had taken off their tunics (especially students whose garments were of fine cloth and perfectly new), and I now did the same, with a consciousness that "IT" was "beginning." There had been no great festivity as yet, but I felt assured that things would go splendidly when once we had begun drinking tumblers of the potion that was now in course of preparation.

At length, the punch was ready, and the Dorpat student, with much bespattering of the table as he did so, ladled the liquor into tumblers, and cried: "Now, gentlemen, please!" When we had each of us taken a sticky tumbler of the stuff into our hands, the Dorpat student and Frost sang a German song in which the word "Hoch!" kept occurring again and again, while we joined, in haphazard fashion, in the chorus. Next we clinked glasses together, shouted something in praise of punch, crossed hands, and took our first drink of the sweet, strong mixture. After that there was no further waiting; the "wine" was in full swing. The first glassful consumed, a second was poured out. Yet, for all that I began to feel a throbbing in my temples, and that the flames seemed to be turning purple, and that every one around me was laughing and shouting, things seemed lacking in real gaiety, and I somehow felt that, as a matter of fact, we were all of us finding the affair rather dull, and only PRETENDING to be enjoying it. The Dorpat student may have been an exception, for he continued to grow more and more red in the face and more and more ubiquitous as he filled up empty glasses and stained the

table with fresh spots of the sweet, sticky stuff. The precise sequence of events I cannot remember, but I can recall feeling strongly attracted towards Frost and the Dorpat student that evening, learning their German song by heart, and kissing them each on their sticky-sweet lips; also that that same evening I conceived a violent hatred against the Dorpat student, and was for pushing him from his chair, but thought better of it; also that, besides feeling the same spirit of independence towards the rest of the company as I had felt on the night of the matriculation dinner, my head ached and swam so badly that I thought each moment would be my last; also that, for some reason or another, we all of us sat down on the floor and imitated the movements of rowers in a boat as we sang in chorus, "Down our mother stream the Volga;" also that I conceived this procedure on our part to be uncalled for; also that, as I lay prone upon the floor, I crossed my legs and began wriggling about like a tsigane; [Gipsy dancer.] also that I ricked some one's neck, and came to the conclusion that I should never have done such a thing if I had not been drunk; also that we had some supper and another kind of liquor, and that I then went to the door to get some fresh air; also that my head seemed suddenly to grow chill, and that I noticed, as I drove away, that the scat of the vehicle was so sharply aslant and slippery that for me to retain my position behind Kuzma was impossible; also that he seemed to have turned all flabby, and to be waving about like a dish clout. But what I remember best is that throughout the whole of that evening I never ceased to feel that I was acting with excessive stupidity in pretending to be enjoying myself, to like drinking a great deal, and to be in no way drunk, as well as that every one else present was acting

with equal stupidity in pretending those same things. All the time I had a feeling that each one of my companions was finding the festivities as distasteful as I was myself; but, in the belief that he was the only one doing so, felt himself bound to pretend that he was very merry, in order not to mar the general hilarity. Also, strange to state, I felt that I ought to keep up this pretence for the sole reason that into a punch-bowl there had been poured three bottles of champagne at nine roubles the bottle and ten bottles of rum at four--making seventy roubles in all, exclusive of the supper. So convinced of my folly did I feel that, when, at next day's lecture, those of my comrades who had been at Baron Z.'s party seemed not only in no way ashamed to remember what they had done, but even talked about it so that other students might hear of their doings, I felt greatly astonished. They all declared that it had been a splendid "wine," that Dorpat students were just the fellows for that kind of thing, and that there had been consumed at it no less than forty bottles of rum among twenty guests, some of whom had dropped senseless under the table! That they should care to talk about such things seemed strange enough, but that they should care to lie about them seemed absolutely unintelligible.