

## XL. MY FRIENDSHIP WITH THE NECHLUDOFFS

That winter, too, I saw a great deal both of Dimitri who often looked us up, and of his family, with whom I was beginning to stand on intimate terms.

The Nechludoffs (that is to say, mother, aunt, and daughter) always spent their evenings at home, at which time the Princess liked young men to visit her--at all events young men of the kind whom she described as able to spend an evening without playing cards or dancing. Yet such young fellows must have been few and far between, for, although I went to the Nechludoffs almost every evening, I seldom found other guests present. Thus, I came to know the members of this family and their several dispositions well enough to be able to form clear ideas as to their mutual relations, and to be quite at home amid the rooms and furniture of their house. Indeed, so long as no other guests were present, I felt entirely at my ease. True, at first I used to feel a little uncomfortable when left alone in the room with Varenika, for I could not rid myself of the idea that, though far from pretty, she wished me to fall in love with her; but in time this nervousness of mine began to lessen, since she always looked so natural, and talked to me so exactly as though she were conversing with her brother or Lubov Sergievna, that I came to look upon her simply as a person to whom it was in no way dangerous or wrong to show that I took pleasure in her company. Throughout the whole of our acquaintance she appeared to me merely a plain, though not positively ugly, girl, concerning whom one

would never ask oneself the question,

"Am I, or am I not, in love with her?" Sometimes I would talk to her direct, but more often I did so through Dimitri or Lubov Sergievna; and it was the latter method which afforded me the most pleasure. I derived considerable gratification from discoursing when she was there, from hearing her sing, and, in general, from knowing that she was in the same room as myself; but it was seldom now that any thoughts of what our future relations might ever be, or that any dreams of self-sacrifice for my friend if he should ever fall in love with my sister, came into my head. If any such ideas or fancies occurred to me, I felt satisfied with the present, and drove away all thoughts about the future.

Yet, in spite of this intimacy, I continued to look upon it as my bounden duty to keep the Nechcludoffs in general, and Varenika in particular, in ignorance of my true feelings and tastes, and strove always to appear altogether another young man than what I really was--to appear, indeed, such a young man as could never possibly have existed. I affected to be "soulful" and would go off into raptures and exclamations and impassioned gestures whenever I wished it to be thought that anything pleased me, while, on the other hand, I tried always to seem indifferent towards any unusual circumstance which I myself perceived or which I had had pointed out to me. I aimed always at figuring both as a sarcastic cynic divorced from every sacred tie and as a shrewd observer, as well as at being accounted logical in all my conduct, precise and methodical in all my ways of life, and at the same time contemptuous of

all materiality. I may safely say that I was far better in reality than the strange being into whom I attempted to convert myself; yet, whatever I was or was not, the Nechudoffs were unfailingly kind to me, and (happily for myself) took no notice (as it now appears) of my play-acting. Only Lubov Sergievna, who, I believe, really believed me to be a great egoist, atheist, and cynic, had no love for me, but frequently disputed what I said, flew into tempers, and left me petrified with her disjointed, irrelevant utterances. Yet Dimitri held always to the same strange, something more than friendly, relations with her, and used to say not only that she was misunderstood by every one, but that she did him a world of good. This, however, did not prevent the rest of his family from finding fault with his infatuation.

Once, when talking to me about this incomprehensible attachment, Varenika explained the matter thus: "You see, Dimitri is a selfish person. He is very proud, and, for all his intellect, very fond of praise, and of surprising people, and of always being FIRST, while little Auntie" (the general nickname for Lubov Sergievna) "is innocent enough to admire him, and at the same time devoid of the tact to conceal her admiration. Consequently she flatters his vanity--not out of pretence, but sincerely."

This dictum I laid to heart, and, when thinking it over afterwards, could not but come to the conclusion that Varenika was very sensible; wherefore I was glad to award her promotion thenceforth in my regard. Yet, though I was always glad enough to assign her any credit which

might arise from my discovering in her character any signs of good sense or other moral qualities, I did so with strict moderation, and never ran to any extreme pitch of enthusiasm in the process. Thus, when Sophia Ivanovna (who was never weary of discussing her niece) related to me how, four years ago, Varenika had suddenly given away all her clothes to some peasant children without first asking permission to do so, so that the garments had subsequently to be recovered, I did not at once accept the fact as entitling Varenika to elevation in my opinion, but went on giving her good advice about the unpracticalness of such views on property.

When other guests were present at the Nechludoffs (among them, sometimes, Woloda and Dubkoff) I used to withdraw myself to a remote plane, and, with the complacency and quiet consciousness of strength of an habitue of the house, listen to what others were saying without putting in a remark myself. Yet everything that these others said seemed to me so immeasurably stupid that I used to feel inwardly amazed that such a clever, logical woman as the Princess, with her equally logical family, could listen to and answer such rubbish. Had it, however, entered into my head to compare what, others said with what I myself said when there alone, I should probably have ceased to feel surprise. Still less should I have continued to feel surprise had I not believed that the women of our own household--Avdotia, Lubotshka, and Katenka--were superior to the rest of their sex, for in that case I should have remembered the kind of things over which Avdotia and Katenka would laugh and jest with Dubkoff from one end of an evening to the

other. I should have remembered that seldom did an evening pass but Dubkoff would first have, an argument about something, and then read in a sententious voice either some verses beginning "Au banquet de la vie, infortune convive" or extracts from *The Demon*. In short, I should have remembered what nonsense they used to chatter for hours at a time.

It need hardly be said that, when guests were present, Varenika paid less attention to me than when we were alone, as well as that I was deprived of the reading and music which I so greatly loved to hear. When talking to guests, she lost, in my eyes, her principal charm--that of quiet seriousness and simplicity. I remember how strange it used to seem to me to hear her discoursing on theatres and the weather to my brother Woloda! I knew that of all things in the world he most despised and shunned banality, and that Varenika herself used to make fun of forced conversations on the weather and similar matters. Why, then, when meeting in society, did they both of them talk such intolerable nothings, and, as it were, shame one another? After talks of this kind I used to feel silently resentful against Woloda, as well as next day to rally Varenika on her overnight guests. Yet one result of it was that I derived all the greater pleasure from being one of the Nechludoffs' family circle. Also, for some reason or another I began to prefer meeting Dimitri in his mother's drawing-room to being with him alone.