

XLI. MY FRIENDSHIP WITH THE NECHLUDOFFS

At this period, indeed, my friendship with Dimitri hung by a hair. I had been criticising him too long not to have discovered faults in his character, for it is only in first youth that we love passionately and therefore love only perfect people. As soon as the mists engendered by love of this kind begin to dissolve, and to be penetrated by the clear beams of reason, we see the object of our adoration in his true shape, and with all his virtues and failings exposed. Some of those failings strike us with the exaggerated force of the unexpected, and combine with the instinct for novelty and the hope that perfection may yet be found in a fellow-man to induce us not only to feel coldness, but even aversion, towards the late object of our adoration. Consequently, desiring it no longer, we usually cast it from us, and pass onwards to seek fresh perfection. For the circumstance that that was not what occurred with respect to my own relation to Dimitri, I was indebted to his stubborn, punctilious, and more critical than impulsive attachment to myself--a tie which I felt ashamed to break. Moreover, our strange vow of frankness bound us together. We were afraid that, if we parted, we should leave in one another's power all the incriminatory moral secrets of which we had made mutual confession. At the same time, our rule of frankness had long ceased to be faithfully observed, but, on the contrary, proved a frequent cause of constraint, and brought about strange relations between us.

Almost every time that winter that I went upstairs to Dimitri's room,

I used to find there a University friend of his named Bezobiedoff, with whom he appeared to be very much taken up. Bezobiedoff was a small, slight fellow, with a face pitted over with smallpox, freckled, effeminate hands, and a huge flaxen moustache much in need of the comb. He was invariably dirty, shabby, uncouth, and uninteresting. To me, Dimitri's relations with him were as unintelligible as his relations with Lubov Sergievna, and the only reason he could have had for choosing such a man for his associate was that in the whole University there was no worse-looking student than Bezobiedoff. Yet that alone would have been sufficient to make Dimitri extend him his friendship, and, as a matter of fact, in all his intercourse with this fellow he seemed to be saying proudly: "I care nothing who a man may be. In my eyes every one is equal. I like him, and therefore he is a desirable acquaintance." Nevertheless I could not imagine how he could bring himself to do it, nor how the wretched Bezobiedoff ever contrived to maintain his awkward position. To me the friendship seemed a most distasteful one.

One night, I went up to Dimitri's room to try and get him to come down for an evening's talk in his mother's drawing-room, where we could also listen to Varenika's reading and singing, but Bezobiedoff had forestalled me there, and Dimitri answered me curtly that he could not come down, since, as I could see for myself, he had a visitor with him.

"Besides," he added, "what is the fun of sitting there? We had much better stay HERE and talk."

I scarcely relished the prospect of spending a couple of hours in Bezobiedoff's company, yet could not make up my mind to go down alone; wherefore, cursing my friend's vagaries, I seated myself in a rocking-chair, and began rocking myself silently to and fro. I felt vexed with them both for depriving me of the pleasures of the drawing-room, and my only hope as I listened irritably to their conversation was that Bezobiedoff would soon take his departure. "A nice guest indeed to be sitting with!" I thought to myself when a footman brought in tea and Dimitri had five times to beg Bezobiedoff to have a cup, for the reason that the bashful guest thought it incumbent upon him always to refuse it at first and to say, "No, help yourself." I could see that Dimitri had to put some restraint upon himself as he resumed the conversation. He tried to inveigle me also into it, but I remained glum and silent.

"I do not mean to let my face give any one the suspicion that I am bored" was my mental remark to Dimitri as I sat quietly rocking myself to and fro with measured beat. Yet, as the moments passed, I found myself--not without a certain satisfaction--growing more and more inwardly hostile to my friend. "What a fool he is!" I reflected. "He might be spending the evening agreeably with his charming family, yet he goes on sitting with this brute!--will go on doing so, too, until it is too late to go down to the drawing-room!" Here I glanced at him over the back of my chair, and thought the general look of his attitude and appearance so offensive and repellant that at the moment I could gladly have offered him some insult, even a most serious one.

At last Bezobiedoff rose, but Dimitri could not easily let such a delightful friend depart, and asked him to stay the night. Fortunately, Bezobiedoff declined the invitation, and departed. Having seen him off, Dimitri returned, and, smiling a faintly complacent smile as he did so, and rubbing his hands together (in all probability partly because he had sustained his character for eccentricity, and partly because he had got rid of a bore), started to pace the room, with an occasional glance at myself. I felt more offended with him than ever. "How can he go on walking about the room and grinning like that?" was my inward reflection.

"What are you so angry about?" he asked me suddenly as he halted in front of my chair.

"I am not in the least angry," I replied (as people always do answer under such circumstances). "I am merely vexed that you should play-act to me, and to Bezobiedoff, and to yourself."

"What rubbish!" he retorted. "I never play-act to any one."

"I have in mind our rule of frankness," I replied, "when I tell you that I am certain you cannot bear this Bezobiedoff any more than I can. He is an absolute cad, yet for some inexplicable reason or another it pleases you to masquerade before him."

"Not at all! To begin with, he is a splendid fellow, and--"

"But I tell you it IS so. I also tell you that your friendship for Lubov Sergievna is founded on the same basis, namely, that she thinks you a god."

"And I tell you once more that it is not so."

"Oh, I know it for myself," I retorted with the heat of suppressed anger, and designing to disarm him with my frankness. "I have told you before, and I repeat it now, that you always seem to like people who say pleasant things to you, but that, as soon as ever I come to examine your friendship, I invariably find that there exists no real attachment between you."

"Oh, but you are wrong," said Dimitri with an angry straightening of the neck in his collar. "When I like people, neither their praise nor their blame can make any difference to my opinion of them."

"Well, dreadful though it may seem to you, I confess that I myself often used to hate my father when he abused me, and to wish that he was dead. In the same way, you--"

"Speak for yourself. I am very sorry that you could ever have been so--"

"No, no!" I cried as I leapt from my chair and faced him with the

courage of exasperation. "It is for YOURSELF that you ought to feel sorry--sorry because you never told me a word about this fellow. You know that was not honourable of you. Nevertheless, I will tell YOU what I think of you," and, burning to wound him even more than he had wounded me, I set out to prove to him that he was incapable of feeling any real affection for anybody, and that I had the best of grounds (as in very truth I believed I had) for reproaching him. I took great pleasure in telling him all this, but at the same time forgot that the only conceivable purpose of my doing so--to force him to confess to the faults of which I had accused him--could not possibly be attained at the present moment, when he was in a rage. Had he, on the other hand, been in a condition to argue calmly, I should probably never have said what I did.

The dispute was verging upon an open quarrel when Dimitri suddenly became silent, and left the room. I pursued him, and continued what I was saying, but he did not answer. I knew that his failings included a hasty temper, and that he was now fighting it down; wherefore I cursed his good resolutions the more in my heart.

This, then, was what our rule of frankness had brought us to--the rule that we should "tell one another everything in our minds, and never discuss one another with a third person!" Many a time we had exaggerated frankness to the pitch of making mutual confession of the most shameless thoughts, and of shaming ourselves by voicing to one another proposals or schemes for attaining our desires; yet those confessions had not

only failed to draw closer the tie which united us, but had dissipated sympathy and thrust us further apart, until now pride would not allow him to expose his feelings even in the smallest detail, and we employed in our quarrel the very weapons which we had formerly surrendered to one another--the weapons which could strike the shrewdest blows!