

### XLIII. NEW COMRADES

The winter had passed imperceptibly and the thaw begun when the list of examinations was posted at the University, and I suddenly remembered that I had to return answers to questions in eighteen subjects on which I had heard lectures delivered, but with regard to some of which I had taken no notes and made no preparation whatever. It seems strange that the question "How am I going to pass?" should never have entered my head, but the truth is that all that winter I had been in such a state of haze through the delights of being both grown-up and "comme il faut" that, whenever the question of the examinations had occurred to me, I had mentally compared myself with my comrades, and thought to myself, "They are certain to pass, and as most of them are not 'comme il faut,' and I am therefore their personal superior, I too am bound to come out all right." In fact, the only reason why I attended lectures at all was that I might become an habitue of the University, and obtain Papa's leave to go in and out of the house. Moreover, I had many acquaintances now, and often enjoyed myself vastly at the University. I loved the racket, talking, and laughter in the auditorium, the opportunities for sitting on a back bench, and letting the measured voice of the professor lure one into dreams as one contemplated one's comrades, the occasional runnings across the way for a snack and a glass of vodka (sweetened by the fearful joy of knowing that one might be hauled before the professor for so doing), the stealthy closing of the door as one returned to the auditorium, and the participation in "course versus course" scuffles in the corridors. All this was very enjoyable.

By the time, however, that every one had begun to put in a better attendance at lectures, and the professor of physics had completed his course and taken his leave of us until the examinations came on, and the students were busy collecting their notebooks and arranging to do their preparation in parties, it struck me that I also had better prepare for the ordeal. Operoff, with whom I still continued on bowing, but otherwise most frigid, terms, suddenly offered not only to lend me his notebooks, but to let me do my preparation with himself and some other students. I thanked him, and accepted the invitation--hoping by that conferment of honour completely to dissipate our old misunderstanding; but at the same time I requested that the gatherings should always be held at my home, since my quarters were so splendid! To this the students replied that they meant to take turn and turn about--sometimes to meet at one fellow's place, sometimes at another's, as might be most convenient.

The first of our reunions was held at Zuchin's, who had a small partition-room in a large building on the Trubni Boulevard. The opening night I arrived late, and entered when the reading aloud had already begun. The little apartment was thick with tobacco-smoke, while on the table stood a bottle of vodka, a decanter, some bread, some salt, and a shin-bone of mutton. Without rising, Zuchin asked me to have some vodka and to doff my tunic.

"I expect you are not accustomed to such entertainment," he added.

Every one was wearing a dirty cotton shirt and a dickey. Endeavouring not to show my contempt for the company, I took off my tunic, and lay down in a sociable manner on the sofa. Zuchin went on reading aloud and correcting himself with the help of notebooks, while the others occasionally stopped him to ask a question, which he always answered with ability, correctness, and precision. I listened for a time with the rest, but, not understanding much of it, since I had not been present at what had been read before, soon interpolated a question.

"Hullo, old fellow! It will be no good for you to listen if you do not know the subject," said Zuchin. "I will lend you my notebooks, and then you can read it up by to-morrow, and I will explain it to you."

I felt rather ashamed of my ignorance. Also, I felt the truth of what he said; so I gave up listening, and amused myself by observing my new comrades. According to my classification of humanity, into persons "comme il faut" and persons not "comme il faut," they evidently belonged to the latter category, and so aroused in me not only a feeling of contempt, but also a certain sensation of personal hostility, for the reason that, though not "comme il faut," they accounted me their equal, and actually patronised me in a sort of good-humoured fashion. What in particular excited in me this feeling was their feet, their dirty nails and fingers, a particularly long talon on Operoff's obtrusive little finger, their red shirts, their dickeys, the chaff which they good-naturedly threw at one another, the dirty room, a habit which

Zuchin had of continually snuffing and pressing a finger to his nose, and, above all, their manner of speaking--that is to say, their use and intonation of words. For instance, they said "flat" for fool, "just the ticket" for exactly, "grandly" for splendidly, and so on--all of which seemed to me either bookish or disagreeably vulgar. Still more was my "comme il faut" refinement disturbed by the accents which they put upon certain Russian--and, still more, upon foreign--words. Thus they said dieYATelnost for DIEyatelnost, NARochno for naROChno, v'KAMinie for v'kaMINie, SHAKespeare for ShakesPEARE, and so forth.

Yet, for all their insuperably repellent exterior, I could detect something good in these fellows, and envied them the cheerful good-fellowship which united them in one. Consequently, I began to feel attracted towards them, and made up my mind that, come what might, I would become of their number. The kind and honourable Operoff I knew already, and now the brusque, but exceptionally clever, Zuchin (who evidently took the lead in this circle) began to please me greatly. He was a dark, thick-set little fellow, with a perennially glistening, polished face, but one that was extremely lively, intellectual, and independent in its expression. That expression it derived from a low, but prominent, forehead, deep black eyes, short, bristly hair, and a thick, dark beard which looked as though it stood in constant need of trimming. Although, too, he seemed to think nothing of himself (a trait which always pleased me in people), it was clear that he never let his brain rest. He had one of those expressive faces which, a few hours after you have seen them for the first time, change suddenly and

entirely to your view. Such a change took place, in my eyes, with regard to Zuchin's face towards the end of that evening. Suddenly, I seemed to see new wrinkles appear upon its surface, its eyes grow deeper, its smile become a different one, and the whole face assume such an altered aspect that I scarcely recognised it.

When the reading was ended, Zuchin, the other students, and myself manifested our desire to be "comrades all" by drinking vodka until little remained in the bottle. Thereupon Zuchin asked if any one had a quarter-rouble to spare, so that he could send the old woman who looked after him to buy some more; yet, on my offering to provide the money, he made as though he had not heard me, and turned to Operoff, who pulled out a purse sewn with bugles, and handed him the sum required.

"And mind you don't get drunk," added the giver, who himself had not partaken of the vodka.

"By heavens!" answered Zuchin as he sucked the marrow out of a mutton bone (I remember thinking that it must be because he ate marrow that he was so clever). "By heavens!" he went on with a slight smile (and his smile was of the kind that one involuntarily noticed, and somehow felt grateful for), "even if I did get drunk, there would be no great harm done. I wonder which of us two could look after himself the better--you or I? Anyway I am willing to make the experiment," and he slapped his forehead with mock boastfulness. "But what a pity it is that Semenoff has disappeared! He has gone and completely hidden himself somewhere."

Sure enough, the grey-haired Semenoff who had comforted me so much at my first examination by being worse dressed than myself, and who, after passing the second examination, had attended his lectures regularly during the first month, had disappeared thereafter from view, and never been seen at the University throughout the latter part of the course.

"Where is he?" asked some one.

"I do not know" replied Zuchin. "He has escaped my eye altogether. Yet what fun I used to have with him! What fire there was in the man! and what an intellect! I should be indeed sorry if he has come to grief--and come to grief he probably has, for he was no mere boy to take his University course in instalments."

After a little further conversation, and agreeing to meet again the next night at Zuchin's, since his abode was the most central point for us all, we began to disperse. As, one by one, we left the room, my conscience started pricking me because every one seemed to be going home on foot, whereas I had my drozhki. Accordingly, with some hesitation I offered Operoff a lift. Zuchin came to the door with us, and, after borrowing a rouble of Operoff, went off to make a night of it with some friends. As we drove along, Operoff told me a good deal about Zuchin's character and mode of life, and on reaching home it was long before I could get to sleep for thinking of the new acquaintances I had made. For many an hour, as I lay awake, I kept wavering between the respect which

their knowledge, simplicity, and sense of honour, as well as the poetry of their youth and courage, excited in my regard, and the distaste which I felt for their outward man. In spite of my desire to do so, it was at that time literally impossible for me to associate with them, since our ideas were too wholly at variance. For me, life's meaning and charm contained an infinitude of shades of which they had not an inkling, and vice versa. The greatest obstacles of all, however, to our better acquaintance I felt to be the twenty roubles' worth of cloth in my tunic, my drozhki, and my white linen shirt; and they appeared to me most important obstacles, since they made me feel as though I had unwittingly insulted these comrades by displaying such tokens of my wealth. I felt guilty in their eyes, and as though, whether I accepted or rejected their acquittal and took a line of my own, I could never enter into equal and unaffected relations with them. Yet to such an extent did the stirring poetry of the courage which I could detect in Zuchin (in particular) overshadow the coarse, vicious side of his nature that the latter made no unpleasant impression upon me.

For a couple of weeks I visited Zuchin's almost every night for purposes of work. Yet I did very little there, since, as I have said, I had lost ground at the start, and, not having sufficient grit in me to catch up my companions by solitary study, was forced merely to PRETEND that I was listening to and taking in all they were reading. I have an idea, too, that they divined my pretence, since I often noticed that they passed over points which they themselves knew without first inquiring of me whether I did the same. Yet, day by day, I was coming to regard the

vulgarity of this circle with more indulgence, to feel increasingly drawn towards its way of life, and to find in it much that was poetical. Only my word of honour to Dimitri that I would never indulge in dissipation with these new comrades kept me from deciding also to share their diversions.

Once, I thought I would make a display of my knowledge of literature, particularly French literature, and so led the conversation to that theme. Judge, then, of my surprise when I discovered that not only had my companions been reading the foreign passages in Russian, but that they had studied far more foreign works than I had, and knew and could appraise English, and even Spanish, writers of whom I had never so much as heard! Likewise, Pushkin and Zhukovski represented to them LITERATURE, and not, as to myself, certain books in yellow covers which I had once read and studied when a child. For Dumas and Sue they had an almost equal contempt, and, in general, were competent to form much better and clearer judgments on literary matters than I was, for all that I refused to recognise the fact. In knowledge of music, too, I could not beat them, and was astonished to find that Operoff played the violin, and another student the cello and piano, while both of them were members of the University orchestra, and possessed a wide knowledge of and appreciation of good music. In short, with the exception of the French and German languages, my companions were better posted at every point than I was, yet not the least proud of the fact. True, I might have plumed myself on my position as a man of the world, but Woloda excelled me even in that. Wherein, then, lay the height from which I



presumed to look down upon these comrades? In my acquaintanceship with Prince Ivan Ivanovitch? In my ability to speak French? In my drozhki? In my linen shirt? In my finger-nails? "Surely these things are all rubbish," was the thought which would come flitting through my head under the influence of the envy which the good-fellowship and kindly, youthful gaiety displayed around me excited in my breast. Every one addressed his interlocutor in the second person singular. True, the familiarity of this address almost approximated to rudeness, yet even the boorish exterior of the speaker could not conceal a constant endeavour never to hurt another one's feelings. The terms "brute" or "swine," when used in this good-natured fashion, only convulsed me, and gave me cause for inward merriment. In no way did they offend the person addressed, or prevent the company at large from remaining on the most sincere and friendly footing. In all their intercourse these youths were delicate and forbearing in a way that only very poor and very young men can be. However much I might detect in Zuchin's character and amusements an element of coarseness and profligacy, I could also detect the fact that his drinking-bouts were of a very different order to the puerility with burnt rum and champagne in which I had participated at Baron Z.'s.