

XLIV. ZUCHIN AND SEMENOFF

Although I do not know what class of society Zuchin belonged to, I know that, without the help either of means or social position, he had matriculated from the Seventh Gymnasium. At that time he was eighteen--though he looked much older--and very clever, especially in his powers of assimilation. To him it was easier to survey the whole of some complicated subject, to foresee its various parts and deductions, than to use that knowledge, when gained, for reasoning out the exact laws to which those deductions were due. He knew that he was clever, and of the fact he was proud; yet from that very pride arose the circumstance that he treated every one with unvarying simplicity and good-nature. Moreover, his experience of life must have been considerable, for already he had squandered much love, friendship, activity, and money. Though poor and moving only in the lower ranks of society, there was nothing which he had ever attempted for which he did not thenceforth feel the contempt, the indifference, or the utter disregard which were bound to result from his attaining his goal too easily. In fact, the very ardour with which he applied himself to a new pursuit seemed to be due to his contempt for what he had already attained, since his abilities always led him to success, and therefore to a certain right to despise it. With the sciences it was the same. Though little interested in them, and taking no notes, he knew mathematics thoroughly, and was uttering no vain boast when he said that he could beat the professor himself. Much of what he heard said in lectures he thought rubbish, yet with his peculiar habit of

unconsciously practical roguishness he feigned to subscribe to all that the professors thought important, and every professor adored him. True, he was outspoken to the authorities, but they none the less respected him. Besides disliking and despising the sciences, he despised all who laboured to attain what he himself had mastered so easily, since the sciences, as he understood them, did not occupy one-tenth part of his powers. In fact, life, as he saw it from the student's standpoint, contained nothing to which he could devote himself wholly, and his impetuous, active nature (as he himself often said) demanded life complete: wherefore he frequented the drinking-bout in so far as he could afford it, and surrendered himself to dissipation chiefly out of a desire to get as far away from himself as possible. Consequently, just as the examinations were approaching, Operoff's prophecy to me came true, for Zuchin wasted two whole weeks in this fashion, and we had to do the latter part of our preparation at another student's. Yet at the first examination he reappeared with pale, haggard face and tremulous hands, and passed brilliantly into the second course!

The company of roisterers of which Zuchin had been the leader since its formation at the beginning of the term consisted of eight students, among whom, at first, had been numbered Ikonin and Semenoff; but the former had left under the strain of the continuous revelry in which the band had indulged in the early part of the term, and the latter seceded later for reasons which were never wholly explained. In its early days this band had been looked upon with awe by all the fellows of our course, and had had its exploits much discussed. Of these exploits

the leading heroes had been Zuchin and, towards the end of the term, Semenoff, but the latter had come to be generally shunned, and to cause disturbances on the rare occasions when he attended a lecture. Just before the examinations began, he rounded off his drinking exploits in a most energetic and original fashion, as I myself had occasion to witness (through my acquaintanceship with Zuchin). This is how it was. One evening we had just assembled at Zuchin's, and Operoff, reinforcing a candlestick with a candle stuck in a bottle, had just plunged his nose into his notebooks and begun to read aloud in his thin voice from his neatly-written notes on physics, when the landlady entered the room, and informed Zuchin that some one had brought a note for him... [The remainder of this chapter is omitted in the original.]