

XLV. I COME TO GRIEF

At length the first examination--on differentials and integrals--drew near, but I continued in a vague state which precluded me from forming any clear idea of what was awaiting me. Every evening, after consorting with Zuchin and the rest, the thought would occur to me that there was something in my convictions which I must change--something wrong and mistaken; yet every morning the daylight would find me again satisfied to be "comme il faut," and desirous of no change whatsoever.

Such was the frame of mind in which I attended for the first examination. I seated myself on the bench where the princes, counts, and barons always sat, and began talking to them in French, with the not unnatural result that I never gave another thought to the answers which I was shortly to return to questions in a subject of which I knew nothing. I gazed supinely at other students as they went up to be examined, and even allowed myself to chaff some of them.

"Well, Grap," I said to Ilinka (who, from our first entry into the University, had shaken off my influence, had ceased to smile when I spoke to him, and always remained ill-disposed towards me), "have you survived the ordeal?"

"Yes," retorted Ilinka. "Let us see if YOU can do so."

I smiled contemptuously at the answer, notwithstanding that the doubt

which he had expressed had given me a momentary shock. Once again, however, indifference overlaid that feeling, and I remained so entirely absent-minded and supine that, the very moment after I had been examined (a mere formality for me, as it turned out) I was making a dinner appointment with Baron Z. When called out with Ikonin, I smoothed the creases in my uniform, and walked up to the examiner's table with perfect sang froid.

True, a slight shiver of apprehension ran down my back when the young professor--the same one as had examined me for my matriculation--looked me straight in the face as I reached across to the envelope containing the tickets. Ikonin, though taking a ticket with the same plunge of his whole body as he had done at the previous examinations, did at least return some sort of an answer this time, though a poor one. I, on the contrary, did just as he had done on the two previous occasions, or even worse, since I took a second ticket, yet for a second time returned no answer. The professor looked me compassionately in the face, and said in a quiet, but determined, voice:

"You will not pass into the second course, Monsieur Irtenieff. You had better not complete the examinations. The faculty must be weeded out. The same with you, Monsieur Ikonin."

Ikonin implored leave to finish the examinations, as a great favour, but the professor replied that he (Ikonin) was not likely to do in two days what he had not succeeded in doing in a year, and that he had not the

smallest chance of passing. Ikonin renewed his humble, piteous appeals, but the professor was inexorable.

"You can go, gentlemen," he remarked in the same quiet, resolute voice.

I was only too glad to do so, for I felt ashamed of seeming, by my silent presence, to be joining in Ikonin's humiliating prayers for grace. I have no recollection of how I threaded my way through the students in the hall, nor of what I replied to their questions, nor of how I passed into the vestibule and departed home. I was offended, humiliated, and genuinely unhappy.

For three days I never left my room, and saw no one, but found relief in copious tears. I should have sought a pistol to shoot myself if I had had the necessary determination for the deed. I thought that Ilinka Grap would spit in my face when he next met me, and that he would have the right to do so; that Operoff would rejoice at my misfortune, and tell every one of it; that Kolpikoff had justly shamed me that night at the restaurant; that my stupid speeches to Princess Kornikoff had had their fitting result; and so on, and so on. All the moments in my life which had been for me most difficult and painful recurred to my mind. I tried to blame some one for my calamity, and thought that some one must have done it on purpose--must have conspired a whole intrigue against me. Next, I murmured against the professors, against my comrades, Woloda, Dimitri, and Papa (the last for having sent me to the University at all). Finally, I railed at Providence for ever having let me see such

ignominy. Believing myself ruined for ever in the eyes of all who knew me, I besought Papa to let me go into the hussars or to the Caucasus. Naturally, Papa was anything but pleased at what had happened; yet, on seeing my passionate grief, he comforted me by saying that, though it was a bad business, it might yet be mended by my transferring to another faculty. Woloda, who also saw nothing very terrible in my misfortune, added that at least I should not be put out of countenance in a new faculty, since I should have new comrades there. As for the ladies of the household, they neither knew nor cared what either an examination or a plucking meant, and condoled with me only because they saw me in such distress. Dimitri came to see me every day, and was very kind and consolatory throughout; but for that very reason he seemed to me to have grown colder than before. It always hurt me and made me feel uncomfortable when he came up to my room and seated himself in silence beside me, much as a doctor might seat himself by the bedside of an awkward patient. Sophia Ivanovna and Varenika sent me books for which I had expressed a wish, as also an invitation to go and see them, but in that very thoughtfulness of theirs I saw only proud, humiliating condescension to one who had fallen beyond forgiveness. Although, in three days' time, I grew calmer, it was not until we departed for the country that I left the house, but spent the time in nursing my grief and wandering, fearful of all the household, through the various rooms.

One evening, as I was sitting deep in thought and listening to Avdotia playing her waltz, I suddenly leapt to my feet, ran upstairs, got out the copy-book whereon I had once inscribed "Rules of My Life," opened

it, and experienced my first moment of repentance and moral resolution. True, I burst into tears once more, but they were no longer tears of despair. Pulling myself together, I set about writing out a fresh set of rules, in the assured conviction that never again would I do a wrong action, waste a single moment on frivolity, or alter the rules which I now decided to frame.

How long that moral impulse lasted, what it consisted of, and what new principles I devised for my moral growth I will relate when speaking of the ensuing and happier portion of my early manhood.