



My First Term at School

I n the middle of winter in the year 1799, when I was eight years old, we traveled to Kazan, the chief town of the Province. The frost was intense; and it was a long time before we could find out the lodgings we had taken beforehand. They consisted of two rooms in a small house belonging to a Mme. Aristov, the wife of an officer; the house stood in Georgia Street, a good part of the town. We arrived towards evening, traveling in a common sledge of matting drawn by three of our own horses harnessed abreast; our cook and a maid had reached Kazan before us. Our last stage was a long one, and we drove about the town for some hours in quest of our lodgings, with long halts caused by the stupidity of our country servants—and I remember that I was chilled to the bone, that our lodgings were cold, and that tea failed to warm me; when I went to bed, I was shaking like a man in a fever. I remember also that my mother who loved me passionately was shivering too, not with cold but with fear that her darling child, her little Seryozha, had caught a chill. She pressed me close to her heart, and laid over our coverlet a satin cloak lined with

fox-fur that had been part of her dowry. At last I got warm and went to sleep; and next morning I woke up quite well, to the inexpressible joy of my anxious mother. My sister and brother, both younger than I, had been left behind with our father's aunt, at her house of Chufarovo in the Province of Simbirsk. It was expected that we should inherit her property; but for the present she would not give a penny to my father, so that he and his family were pretty often in difficulties; she was unwilling even to lend him a single ruble. I do not know the circumstances which induced my parents, straitened as they were for money, to travel to Kazan; but I do know that it was not done on my account, though my whole future was affected by this expedition.

When I awoke next morning, I was much impressed by the movement of people in the street; it was the first time I had seen anything of the kind, and the impression was so strong that I could not tear myself away from the window. Our maid, Parasha, who had come with us, could not satisfy me by her replies to my questions, for she knew as little as I did; so I managed to get hold of a maid belonging to the house and went on for some hours teasing her with questions, some of which she was puzzled to answer. My father and mother had gone off to the Cathedral to pray there, and to some other places on business of their own; but they refused to take me, fearing for me the intense cold of that Epiphany season. They dined at home, but drove out again in the evening. Tired out by new sensations, I fell asleep earlier than usual, while chattering myself and hearing Parasha chatter. But I had hardly got to sleep when the same Parasha roused me with a kind and careful hand; and I was told that a sledge had been sent for me, and I must get up at once and go to a party where I should find my parents. I was dressed in my best clothes, washed, and brushed; then

I was wrapped up and placed in the sledge, still in Parasha's company. I was naturally shy; I had been caught up out of the sound sleep of childhood and was frightened by such an unheard-of event, so that my heart failed me and—as we drove through the deserted streets of the town—I had a presentiment of something terrible. At last we reached the house. Parasha took off my wraps in the hall and, repeating in a whisper the encouragement she had given me several times on our way, led me to the drawing room, where a footman opened the door and I walked in.

The glitter of candles and sound of loud voices alarmed me so much that I stood stock-still by the door. My father was the first to see me; he called out, "Ah, there is the recruit!"—which alarmed me still more. "Your forehead!" cried someone in a stentorian voice, and a very tall man rose from an armchair and walked towards me. I understood the meaning of this phrase* and was so terrified by it that I turned instinctively to run away, till I was checked by the loud laughter of all the company. But the joke did not amuse my mother: her tender heart was troubled by the fears of her child, and she ran towards me, took me in her arms, and gave me courage by her words and caresses. I shed a few tears but soon grew calm.

And now I must explain where I had been taken. It was the house of an old friend of the family, Maxim Knyazhevich, who, after living for several years at Ufa as my father's colleague in the law courts, had moved with his wife to Kazan, to perform the same duties there. In early youth he had left his native country of Serbia and at once received

* That is, "Present your forehead" to be shaved. In those days the hair on the forehead of recruits for the Army was shaved as soon as they were approved by the doctors.

a commission in the Russian Horse Guards; later he had been sent to Ufa in a legal capacity. He might be called a typical specimen of a Southern Slav, and was remarkable for his cordial and hospitable temperament. As he was very tall and had harsh features, his exterior was at first sight rather disturbing; but he had the kindest of hearts. His wife, Elizabeth, was the daughter of a Russian noble. Their house in Kazan was distinguished by this inscription over the entrance: "Good people, you are welcome"—a true expression of Slav hospitality. When they lived at Ufa, we often met, and my sister and I used to play with the two elder sons, Dmitri and Alexander. The boys were in the room, though I did not recognize them at once; but when my mother explained, and reminded me of them, I called out at once, "Why, mama, surely these are the boys who taught me how to crack walnuts with my head!" The company laughed at my exclamation, my shyness passed off, and in good spirits I began to renew acquaintance with my former playmates. They were dressed in green uniforms with scarlet collars, and I was told that they attended the grammar school of Kazan. An hour later, they drove back to school; it was Sunday, and the two boys had leave to spend the day with their parents till eight in the evening.

I soon grew weary; and, as I listened to the talk between my parents and our hosts, I was falling asleep, when suddenly my ear was caught by some words which filled me with horror and drove sleep far from me. "Yes, my good friends, Alexei Stepanich and Sofya Nikolaevna," M. Knyazhevich was speaking in his loud positive voice, "do take a piece of friendly advice, and send Seryozha to the grammar school here. It is especially important, because I can see that he is his mother's darling, and she will spoil him

and coddle him till she makes an old woman of him. It is time for the boy to be learning something; at Ufa the only teacher was Matvei Vasilich at the National School, and he was no great hand; but now that you have gone to live in the country, you won't find anyone even as good." My father said that he agreed entirely with this opinion, but my mother turned pale at the thought of parting with her treasure and replied, with much agitation, that I was still young and weak in health (which was true, to some extent) and so devoted to her that she could not make up her mind in a moment to such a change. As for me, I sat there more dead than alive, neither hearing nor understanding anything further that was said. Supper was served at ten o'clock, but neither my mother nor I could swallow a morsel. At last the same sledge which had brought me carried us back to our lodgings. At bedtime, when I embraced my mother as usual and clung close to her, we both began to sob aloud. My voice was choked, and I could only say, "Mama, don't send me to school!" She sobbed too, and for a long time we prevented my father from sleeping. At last she decided that nothing should induce her to part from me, and towards morning we fell asleep.