

CHAPTER V

“And what do you think of this latest comedy, the coronation at Milan?” asked Anna Pávlovna, “and of the comedy of the people of Genoa and Lucca laying their petitions before Monsieur Buonaparte, and Monsieur Buonaparte sitting on a throne and granting the petitions of the nations? Adorable! It is enough to make one’s head whirl! It is as if the whole world had gone crazy.”

Prince Andrew looked Anna Pávlovna straight in the face with a sarcastic smile.

“‘Dieu me la donne, gare à qui la touche!’” * They say he was very fine when he said that,” he remarked, repeating the words in Italian: “‘Dio mi l’ha dato. Guai a chi la tocchi!’”

* God has given it to me, let him who touches it beware!

“I hope this will prove the last drop that will make the glass run over,” Anna Pávlovna continued. “The sovereigns will not be able to endure this man who is a menace to everything.”

“The sovereigns? I do not speak of Russia,” said the vicomte, polite but hopeless: “The sovereigns, madame... What have they done for Louis XVII, for the Queen, or for Madame Elizabeth? Nothing!” and he became more animated. “And believe me, they are reaping the reward of their betrayal of the Bourbon cause. The sovereigns! Why, they are sending ambassadors to compliment the usurper.”

And sighing disdainfully, he again changed his position.

Prince Hippolyte, who had been gazing at the vicomte for some time through his lorgnette, suddenly turned completely round toward the little princess, and having asked for a needle began tracing the Condé coat of arms on the table. He explained this to her with as much gravity as if she had asked him to do it.

“Bâton de gueules, engrêlé de gueules d’azur—maison Condé,” said he.

The princess listened, smiling.

“If Buonaparte remains on the throne of France a year longer,” the vicomte continued, with the air of a man who, in a matter with which he is better acquainted than anyone else, does not listen to others but follows the current of his own thoughts, “things will have gone too far. By intrigues, violence, exile, and executions, French society—I mean good French society—will have been forever destroyed, and then....”

He shrugged his shoulders and spread out his hands. Pierre wished to make a remark, for the conversation interested him, but Anna Pávlovna, who had him under observation, interrupted:

“The Emperor Alexander,” said she, with the melancholy which always accompanied any reference of hers to the Imperial family, “has declared that he will leave it to the French people themselves to choose their own form of government; and I believe that once free from the usurper, the whole nation will certainly throw itself into the arms of its rightful king,” she concluded, trying to be amiable to the royalist emigrant.

“That is doubtful,” said Prince Andrew. “Monsieur le Vicomte quite rightly supposes that matters have already gone too far. I think it will be difficult to return to the old regime.”

“From what I have heard,” said Pierre, blushing and breaking into the conversation, “almost all the aristocracy has already gone over to Bonaparte’s side.”

“It is the Buonapartists who say that,” replied the vicomte without looking at Pierre. “At the present time it is difficult to know the real state of French public opinion.”

“Bonaparte has said so,” remarked Prince Andrew with a sarcastic smile.

It was evident that he did not like the vicomte and was aiming his remarks at him, though without looking at him.

“I showed them the path to glory, but they did not follow it,” Prince Andrew continued after a short silence, again quoting Napoleon’s words. “I opened my antechambers and they crowded in. I do not know how far he was justified in saying so.”

“Not in the least,” replied the vicomte. “After the murder of the duc even the most partial ceased to regard him as a hero. If to some people,” he went on, turning to Anna Pávlovna, “he ever was a hero, after the murder of the duc there was one martyr more in heaven and one hero less on earth.”

Before Anna Pávlovna and the others had time to smile their appreciation of the vicomte’s epigram, Pierre again broke into the conversation, and though Anna Pávlovna felt sure he would say something inappropriate, she was unable to stop him.

“The execution of the Duc d’Enghien,” declared Monsieur Pierre, “was a political necessity, and it seems to me that Napoleon showed greatness of soul by not fearing to take on himself the whole responsibility of that deed.”

“Dieu! Mon Dieu!” muttered Anna Pávlovna in a terrified whisper.

“What, Monsieur Pierre... Do you consider that assassination shows greatness of soul?” said the little princess, smiling and drawing her work nearer to her.

“Oh! Oh!” exclaimed several voices.

“Capital!” said Prince Hippolyte in English, and began slapping his knee with the palm of his hand.

The vicomte merely shrugged his shoulders. Pierre looked solemnly at his audience over his spectacles and continued.

“I say so,” he continued desperately, “because the Bourbons fled from the Revolution leaving the people to anarchy, and Napoleon alone understood the Revolution and quelled it, and so for the general good, he could not stop short for the sake of one man’s life.”

“Won’t you come over to the other table?” suggested Anna Pávlovna.

But Pierre continued his speech without heeding her.

“No,” cried he, becoming more and more eager, “Napoleon is great because he rose superior to the Revolution, suppressed its abuses, preserved all that was good in it—equality of citizenship and freedom of speech and of the press—and only for that reason did he obtain power.”

“Yes, if having obtained power, without availing himself of it to commit murder he had restored it to the rightful king, I should have called him a great man,” remarked the vicomte.

“He could not do that. The people only gave him power that he might rid them of the Bourbons and because they saw that he was a great man. The Revolution was a grand thing!” continued Monsieur Pierre, betraying by this desperate and provocative proposition his extreme youth and his wish to express all that was in his mind.

“What? Revolution and regicide a grand thing?... Well, after that... But won’t you come to this other table?” repeated Anna Pávlovna.

“Rousseau’s Contrat Social,” said the vicomte with a tolerant smile.

“I am not speaking of regicide, I am speaking about ideas.”

“Yes: ideas of robbery, murder, and regicide,” again interjected an ironical voice.

“Those were extremes, no doubt, but they are not what is most important. What is important are the rights of man, emancipation from prejudices, and equality of citizenship, and all these ideas Napoleon has retained in full force.”

“Liberty and equality,” said the vicomte contemptuously, as if at last deciding seriously to prove to this youth how foolish his words were, “high-sounding words which have long been discredited. Who does not love liberty and equality? Even our Saviour preached liberty and

equality. Have people since the Revolution become happier? On the contrary. We wanted liberty, but Buonaparte has destroyed it.”

Prince Andrew kept looking with an amused smile from Pierre to the vicomte and from the vicomte to their hostess. In the first moment of Pierre’s outburst Anna Pávlovna, despite her social experience, was horror-struck. But when she saw that Pierre’s sacrilegious words had not exasperated the vicomte, and had convinced herself that it was impossible to stop him, she rallied her forces and joined the vicomte in a vigorous attack on the orator.

“But, my dear Monsieur Pierre,” said she, “how do you explain the fact of a great man executing a duc—or even an ordinary man who—is innocent and untried?”

“I should like,” said the vicomte, “to ask how monsieur explains the 18th Brumaire; was not that an imposture? It was a swindle, and not at all like the conduct of a great man!”

“And the prisoners he killed in Africa? That was horrible!” said the little princess, shrugging her shoulders.

“He’s a low fellow, say what you will,” remarked Prince Hippolyte.

Pierre, not knowing whom to answer, looked at them all and smiled. His smile was unlike the half-smile of other people. When he smiled, his grave, even rather gloomy, look was instantaneously replaced by another—a childlike, kindly, even rather silly look, which seemed to ask forgiveness.

The vicomte who was meeting him for the first time saw clearly that this young Jacobin was not so terrible as his words suggested. All were silent.

“How do you expect him to answer you all at once?” said Prince Andrew. “Besides, in the actions of a statesman one has to distinguish between his acts as a private person, as a general, and as an emperor. So it seems to me.”

“Yes, yes, of course!” Pierre chimed in, pleased at the arrival of this reinforcement.

“One must admit,” continued Prince Andrew, “that Napoleon as a man was great on the bridge of Arcola, and in the hospital at Jaffa where he gave his hand to the plague-stricken; but ... but there are other acts which it is difficult to justify.”

Prince Andrew, who had evidently wished to tone down the awkwardness of Pierre’s remarks, rose and made a sign to his wife that it was time to go.

Suddenly Prince Hippolyte started up making signs to everyone to attend, and asking them all to be seated began:

“I was told a charming Moscow story today and must treat you to it. Excuse me, Vicomte—I must tell it in Russian or the point will be lost...” And Prince Hippolyte began to tell his story in such Russian as a Frenchman would speak after spending about a year in Russia. Everyone waited, so emphatically and eagerly did he demand their attention to his story.

“There is in Moscow a lady, une dame, and she is very stingy. She must have two footmen behind her carriage, and very big ones. That was her taste. And she had a lady’s maid, also big. She said....”

Here Prince Hippolyte paused, evidently collecting his ideas with difficulty.

“She said.... Oh yes! She said, ‘Girl,’ to the maid, ‘put on a livery, get up behind the carriage, and come with me while I make some calls.’”

Here Prince Hippolyte spluttered and burst out laughing long before his audience, which produced an effect unfavorable to the narrator. Several persons, among them the elderly lady and Anna Pávlovna, did however smile.

“She went. Suddenly there was a great wind. The girl lost her hat and her long hair came down....” Here he could contain himself no longer and went on, between gasps of laughter: “And the whole world knew....”

And so the anecdote ended. Though it was unintelligible why he had told it, or why it had to be told in Russian, still Anna Pávlovna and the others appreciated Prince Hippolyte’s social tact in so agreeably ending Pierre’s unpleasant and unamiable outburst. After the anecdote the conversation broke up into insignificant small talk about the last and next balls, about theatricals, and who would meet whom, and when and where.