

## CHAPTER XIV

After receiving her visitors, the countess was so tired that she gave orders to admit no more, but the porter was told to be sure to invite to dinner all who came “to congratulate.” The countess wished to have a tête-à-tête talk with the friend of her childhood, Princess Anna Mikháylovna, whom she had not seen properly since she returned from Petersburg. Anna Mikháylovna, with her tear-worn but pleasant face, drew her chair nearer to that of the countess.

“With you I will be quite frank,” said Anna Mikháylovna. “There are not many left of us old friends! That’s why I so value your friendship.”

Anna Mikháylovna looked at Véra and paused. The countess pressed her friend’s hand.

“Véra,” she said to her eldest daughter who was evidently not a favorite, “how is it you have so little tact? Don’t you see you are not wanted here? Go to the other girls, or...”

The handsome Véra smiled contemptuously but did not seem at all hurt.

“If you had told me sooner, Mamma, I would have gone,” she replied as she rose to go to her own room.

But as she passed the sitting room she noticed two couples sitting, one pair at each window. She stopped and smiled scornfully. Sónya was sitting close to Nicholas who was copying out some verses for her, the first he had ever written. Borís and Natásha were at the other window and ceased talking when Véra entered. Sónya and Natásha looked at Véra with guilty, happy faces.

It was pleasant and touching to see these little girls in love; but apparently the sight of them roused no pleasant feeling in Véra.

“How often have I asked you not to take my things?” she said. “You have a room of your own,” and she took the inkstand from Nicholas.

“In a minute, in a minute,” he said, dipping his pen.

“You always manage to do things at the wrong time,” continued Véra. “You came rushing into the drawing room so that everyone felt ashamed of you.”

Though what she said was quite just, perhaps for that very reason no one replied, and the four simply looked at one another. She lingered in the room with the inkstand in her hand.

“And at your age what secrets can there be between Natásha and Borís, or between you two? It’s all nonsense!”

“Now, Véra, what does it matter to you?” said Natásha in defense,

speaking very gently.

She seemed that day to be more than ever kind and affectionate to everyone.

“Very silly,” said Véra. “I am ashamed of you. Secrets indeed!”

“All have secrets of their own,” answered Natásha, getting warmer. “We don’t interfere with you and Berg.”

“I should think not,” said Véra, “because there can never be anything wrong in my behavior. But I’ll just tell Mamma how you are behaving with Borís.”

“Natálya Ilyníchna behaves very well to me,” remarked Borís. “I have nothing to complain of.”

“Don’t, Borís! You are such a diplomat that it is really tiresome,” said Natásha in a mortified voice that trembled slightly. (She used the word “diplomat,” which was just then much in vogue among the children, in the special sense they attached to it.) “Why does she bother me?” And she added, turning to Véra, “You’ll never understand it, because you’ve never loved anyone. You have no heart! You are a Madame de Genlis and nothing more” (this nickname, bestowed on Véra by Nicholas, was considered very stinging), “and your greatest pleasure is to be unpleasant to people! Go and flirt with Berg as much as you please,” she finished quickly.

“I shall at any rate not run after a young man before visitors...”

“Well, now you’ve done what you wanted,” put in Nicholas—“said unpleasant things to everyone and upset them. Let’s go to the nursery.”

All four, like a flock of scared birds, got up and left the room.

“The unpleasant things were said to me,” remarked Véra, “I said none to anyone.”

“Madame de Genlis! Madame de Genlis!” shouted laughing voices through the door.

The handsome Véra, who produced such an irritating and unpleasant effect on everyone, smiled and, evidently unmoved by what had been said to her, went to the looking glass and arranged her hair and scarf. Looking at her own handsome face she seemed to become still colder and calmer.

In the drawing room the conversation was still going on.

“Ah, my dear,” said the countess, “my life is not all roses either. Don’t I know that at the rate we are living our means won’t last long? It’s all the Club and his easygoing nature. Even in the

country do we get any rest? Theatricals, hunting, and heaven knows what besides! But don't let's talk about me; tell me how you managed everything. I often wonder at you, Annette—how at your age you can rush off alone in a carriage to Moscow, to Petersburg, to those ministers and great people, and know how to deal with them all! It's quite astonishing. How did you get things settled? I couldn't possibly do it."

"Ah, my love," answered Anna Mikháylovna, "God grant you never know what it is to be left a widow without means and with a son you love to distraction! One learns many things then," she added with a certain pride. "That lawsuit taught me much. When I want to see one of those big people I write a note: 'Princess So-and-So desires an interview with So and-So,' and then I take a cab and go myself two, three, or four times—till I get what I want. I don't mind what they think of me."

"Well, and to whom did you apply about Bóry?" asked the countess. "You see yours is already an officer in the Guards, while my Nicholas is going as a cadet. There's no one to interest himself for him. To whom did you apply?"

"To Prince Vasíli. He was so kind. He at once agreed to everything, and put the matter before the Emperor," said Princess Anna Mikháylovna enthusiastically, quite forgetting all the humiliation she had endured to gain her end.

"Has Prince Vasíli aged much?" asked the countess. "I have not seen him since we acted together at the Rummyántsovs' theatricals. I expect he has forgotten me. He paid me attentions in those days," said the countess, with a smile.

"He is just the same as ever," replied Anna Mikháylovna, "overflowing with amiability. His position has not turned his head at all. He said to me, 'I am sorry I can do so little for you, dear Princess. I am at your command.' Yes, he is a fine fellow and a very kind relation. But, Nataly, you know my love for my son: I would do anything for his happiness! And my affairs are in such a bad way that my position is now a terrible one," continued Anna Mikháylovna, sadly, dropping her voice. "My wretched lawsuit takes all I have and makes no progress. Would you believe it, I have literally not a penny and don't know how to equip Borís." She took out her handkerchief and began to cry. "I need five hundred rubles, and have only one twenty-five-ruble note. I am in such a state.... My only hope now is in Count Cyril Vladímirovich Bezúkhov. If he will not assist his godson—you know he is Bóry's godfather—and allow him something for his maintenance, all my trouble will have been thrown away.... I shall not be able to equip him."

The countess' eyes filled with tears and she pondered in silence.

"I often think, though, perhaps it's a sin," said the princess, "that here lives Count Cyril Vladímirovich Bezúkhov so rich, all alone... that tremendous fortune... and what is his life worth? It's a

burden to him, and Bóry's life is only just beginning....”

“Surely he will leave something to Borís,” said the countess.

“Heaven only knows, my dear! These rich grandees are so selfish. Still, I will take Borís and go to see him at once, and I shall speak to him straight out. Let people think what they will of me, it's really all the same to me when my son's fate is at stake.” The princess rose. “It's now two o'clock and you dine at four. There will just be time.”

And like a practical Petersburg lady who knows how to make the most of time, Anna Mikháylovna sent someone to call her son, and went into the anteroom with him.

“Good-by, my dear,” said she to the countess who saw her to the door, and added in a whisper so that her son should not hear, “Wish me good luck.”

“Are you going to Count Cyril Vladímirovich, my dear?” said the count coming out from the dining hall into the anteroom, and he added: “If he is better, ask Pierre to dine with us. He has been to the house, you know, and danced with the children. Be sure to invite him, my dear. We will see how Tarás distinguishes himself today. He says Count Orlóv never gave such a dinner as ours will be!”