

## CHAPTER XV

“My dear Borís,” said Princess Anna Mikháylovna to her son as Countess Rostóva’s carriage in which they were seated drove over the straw covered street and turned into the wide courtyard of Count Cyril Vladímirovich Bezúkhov’s house. “My dear Borís,” said the mother, drawing her hand from beneath her old mantle and laying it timidly and tenderly on her son’s arm, “be affectionate and attentive to him. Count Cyril Vladímirovich is your godfather after all, and your future depends on him. Remember that, my dear, and be nice to him, as you so well know how to be.”

“If only I knew that anything besides humiliation would come of it...” answered her son coldly. “But I have promised and will do it for your sake.”

Although the hall porter saw someone’s carriage standing at the entrance, after scrutinizing the mother and son (who without asking to be announced had passed straight through the glass porch between the rows of statues in niches) and looking significantly at the lady’s old cloak, he asked whether they wanted the count or the princesses, and, hearing that they wished to see the count, said his excellency was worse today, and that his excellency was not receiving anyone.

“We may as well go back,” said the son in French.

“My dear!” exclaimed his mother imploringly, again laying her hand on his arm as if that touch might soothe or rouse him.

Borís said no more, but looked inquiringly at his mother without taking off his cloak.

“My friend,” said Anna Mikháylovna in gentle tones, addressing the hall porter, “I know Count Cyril Vladímirovich is very ill... that’s why I have come... I am a relation. I shall not disturb him, my friend... I only need see Prince Vasíli Sergéevich: he is staying here, is he not? Please announce me.”

The hall porter sullenly pulled a bell that rang upstairs, and turned away.

“Princess Drubetskáyá to see Prince Vasíli Sergéevich,” he called to a footman dressed in knee breeches, shoes, and a swallow-tail coat, who ran downstairs and looked over from the halfway landing.

The mother smoothed the folds of her dyed silk dress before a large Venetian mirror in the wall, and in her trodden-down shoes briskly ascended the carpeted stairs.

“My dear,” she said to her son, once more stimulating him by a touch, “you promised me!”

The son, lowering his eyes, followed her quietly.

They entered the large hall, from which one of the doors led to the apartments assigned to Prince Vasíli.

Just as the mother and son, having reached the middle of the hall, were about to ask their way of an elderly footman who had sprung up as they entered, the bronze handle of one of the doors turned and Prince Vasíli came out—wearing a velvet coat with a single star on his breast, as was his custom when at home—taking leave of a good-looking, dark-haired man. This was the celebrated Petersburg doctor, Lorrain.

“Then it is certain?” said the prince.

“Prince, humanum est errare, \* but...” replied the doctor, swallowing his r’s, and pronouncing the Latin words with a French accent.

\* To err is human.

“Very well, very well...”

Seeing Anna Mikháylovna and her son, Prince Vasíli dismissed the doctor with a bow and approached them silently and with a look of inquiry. The son noticed that an expression of profound sorrow suddenly clouded his mother’s face, and he smiled slightly.

“Ah, Prince! In what sad circumstances we meet again! And how is our dear invalid?” said she, as though unaware of the cold offensive look fixed on her.

Prince Vasíli stared at her and at Borís questioningly and perplexed. Borís bowed politely. Prince Vasíli without acknowledging the bow turned to Anna Mikháylovna, answering her query by a movement of the head and lips indicating very little hope for the patient.

“Is it possible?” exclaimed Anna Mikháylovna. “Oh, how awful! It is terrible to think.... This is my son,” she added, indicating Borís. “He wanted to thank you himself.”

Borís bowed again politely.

“Believe me, Prince, a mother’s heart will never forget what you have done for us.”

“I am glad I was able to do you a service, my dear Anna Mikháylovna,” said Prince Vasíli, arranging his lace frill, and in tone and manner, here in Moscow to Anna Mikháylovna whom he had placed under an obligation, assuming an air of much greater importance than he had done in Petersburg at Anna Schérer’s reception.

“Try to serve well and show yourself worthy,” added he, addressing Borís with severity. “I am glad.... Are you here on leave?” he went on in his usual tone of indifference.

“I am awaiting orders to join my new regiment, your excellency,” replied Borís, betraying neither annoyance at the prince’s brusque manner nor a desire to enter into conversation, but speaking so quietly and respectfully that the prince gave him a searching glance.

“Are you living with your mother?”

“I am living at Countess Rostóva’s,” replied Borís, again adding, “your excellency.”

“That is, with Ilyá Rostóv who married Nataly Shinshiná,” said Anna Mikháylovna.

“I know, I know,” answered Prince Vasíli in his monotonous voice. “I never could understand how Nataly made up her mind to marry that unlicked bear! A perfectly absurd and stupid fellow, and a gambler too, I am told.”

“But a very kind man, Prince,” said Anna Mikháylovna with a pathetic smile, as though she too knew that Count Rostóv deserved this censure, but asked him not to be too hard on the poor old man. “What do the doctors say?” asked the princess after a pause, her worn face again expressing deep sorrow.

“They give little hope,” replied the prince.

“And I should so like to thank Uncle once for all his kindness to me and Borís. He is his godson,” she added, her tone suggesting that this fact ought to give Prince Vasíli much satisfaction.

Prince Vasíli became thoughtful and frowned. Anna Mikháylovna saw that he was afraid of finding in her a rival for Count Bezúkhov’s fortune, and hastened to reassure him.

“If it were not for my sincere affection and devotion to Uncle,” said she, uttering the word with peculiar assurance and unconcern, “I know his character: noble, upright ... but you see he has no one with him except the young princesses.... They are still young....” She bent her head and continued in a whisper: “Has he performed his final duty, Prince? How priceless are those last moments! It can make things no worse, and it is absolutely necessary to prepare him if he is so ill. We women, Prince,” and she smiled tenderly, “always know how to say these things. I absolutely must see him, however painful it may be for me. I am used to suffering.”

Evidently the prince understood her, and also understood, as he had done at Anna Pávlovna’s, that it would be difficult to get rid of Anna Mikháylovna.

“Would not such a meeting be too trying for him, dear Anna Mikháylovna?” said he. “Let us wait until evening. The doctors are expecting a crisis.”

“But one cannot delay, Prince, at such a moment! Consider that the

welfare of his soul is at stake. Ah, it is awful: the duties of a Christian...”

A door of one of the inner rooms opened and one of the princesses, the count’s niece, entered with a cold, stern face. The length of her body was strikingly out of proportion to her short legs. Prince Vasíli turned to her.

“Well, how is he?”

“Still the same; but what can you expect, this noise...” said the princess, looking at Anna Mikháylovna as at a stranger.

“Ah, my dear, I hardly knew you,” said Anna Mikháylovna with a happy smile, ambling lightly up to the count’s niece. “I have come, and am at your service to help you nurse my uncle. I imagine what you have gone through,” and she sympathetically turned up her eyes.

The princess gave no reply and did not even smile, but left the room as Anna Mikháylovna took off her gloves and, occupying the position she had conquered, settled down in an armchair, inviting Prince Vasíli to take a seat beside her.

“Borís,” she said to her son with a smile, “I shall go in to see the count, my uncle; but you, my dear, had better go to Pierre meanwhile and don’t forget to give him the Rostóvs’ invitation. They ask him to dinner. I suppose he won’t go?” she continued, turning to the prince.

“On the contrary,” replied the prince, who had plainly become depressed, “I shall be only too glad if you relieve me of that young man.... Here he is, and the count has not once asked for him.”

He shrugged his shoulders. A footman conducted Borís down one flight of stairs and up another, to Pierre’s rooms.