

CHAPTER XVI

Pierre, after all, had not managed to choose a career for himself in Petersburg, and had been expelled from there for riotous conduct and sent to Moscow. The story told about him at Count Rostóv's was true. Pierre had taken part in tying a policeman to a bear. He had now been for some days in Moscow and was staying as usual at his father's house. Though he expected that the story of his escapade would be already known in Moscow and that the ladies about his father—who were never favorably disposed toward him—would have used it to turn the count against him, he nevertheless on the day of his arrival went to his father's part of the house. Entering the drawing room, where the princesses spent most of their time, he greeted the ladies, two of whom were sitting at embroidery frames while a third read aloud. It was the eldest who was reading—the one who had met Anna Mikháylovna. The two younger ones were embroidering: both were rosy and pretty and they differed only in that one had a little mole on her lip which made her much prettier. Pierre was received as if he were a corpse or a leper. The eldest princess paused in her reading and silently stared at him with frightened eyes; the second assumed precisely the same expression; while the youngest, the one with the mole, who was of a cheerful and lively disposition, bent over her frame to hide a smile probably evoked by the amusing scene she foresaw. She drew her wool down through the canvas and, scarcely able to refrain from laughing, stooped as if trying to make out the pattern.

“How do you do, cousin?” said Pierre. “You don't recognize me?”

“I recognize you only too well, too well.”

“How is the count? Can I see him?” asked Pierre, awkwardly as usual, but unabashed.

“The count is suffering physically and mentally, and apparently you have done your best to increase his mental sufferings.”

“Can I see the count?” Pierre again asked.

“Hm.... If you wish to kill him, to kill him outright, you can see him... Olga, go and see whether Uncle's beef tea is ready—it is almost time,” she added, giving Pierre to understand that they were busy, and busy making his father comfortable, while evidently he, Pierre, was only busy causing him annoyance.

Olga went out. Pierre stood looking at the sisters; then he bowed and said: “Then I will go to my rooms. You will let me know when I can see him.”

And he left the room, followed by the low but ringing laughter of the sister with the mole.

Next day Prince Vasíli had arrived and settled in the count's house.

He sent for Pierre and said to him: “My dear fellow, if you are going to behave here as you did in Petersburg, you will end very badly; that is all I have to say to you. The count is very, very ill, and you must not see him at all.”

Since then Pierre had not been disturbed and had spent the whole time in his rooms upstairs.

When Borís appeared at his door Pierre was pacing up and down his room, stopping occasionally at a corner to make menacing gestures at the wall, as if running a sword through an invisible foe, and glaring savagely over his spectacles, and then again resuming his walk, muttering indistinct words, shrugging his shoulders and gesticulating.

“England is done for,” said he, scowling and pointing his finger at someone unseen. “Mr. Pitt, as a traitor to the nation and to the rights of man, is sentenced to...” But before Pierre—who at that moment imagined himself to be Napoleon in person and to have just effected the dangerous crossing of the Straits of Dover and captured London—could pronounce Pitt’s sentence, he saw a well-built and handsome young officer entering his room. Pierre paused. He had left Moscow when Borís was a boy of fourteen, and had quite forgotten him, but in his usual impulsive and hearty way he took Borís by the hand with a friendly smile.

“Do you remember me?” asked Borís quietly with a pleasant smile. “I have come with my mother to see the count, but it seems he is not well.”

“Yes, it seems he is ill. People are always disturbing him,” answered Pierre, trying to remember who this young man was.

Borís felt that Pierre did not recognize him but did not consider it necessary to introduce himself, and without experiencing the least embarrassment looked Pierre straight in the face.

“Count Rostóv asks you to come to dinner today,” said he, after a considerable pause which made Pierre feel uncomfortable.

“Ah, Count Rostóv!” exclaimed Pierre joyfully. “Then you are his son, Ilyá? Only fancy, I didn’t know you at first. Do you remember how we went to the Sparrow Hills with Madame Jacquot?... It’s such an age...”

“You are mistaken,” said Borís deliberately, with a bold and slightly sarcastic smile. “I am Borís, son of Princess Anna Mikháylovna Drubetskáya. Rostóv, the father, is Ilyá, and his son is Nicholas. I never knew any Madame Jacquot.”

Pierre shook his head and arms as if attacked by mosquitoes or bees.

“Oh dear, what am I thinking about? I’ve mixed everything up. One has so many relatives in Moscow! So you are Borís? Of course. Well, now we know where we are. And what do you think of the Boulogne expedition?”

The English will come off badly, you know, if Napoleon gets across the Channel. I think the expedition is quite feasible. If only Villeneuve doesn't make a mess of things!"

Borís knew nothing about the Boulogne expedition; he did not read the papers and it was the first time he had heard Villeneuve's name.

"We here in Moscow are more occupied with dinner parties and scandal than with politics," said he in his quiet ironical tone. "I know nothing about it and have not thought about it. Moscow is chiefly busy with gossip," he continued. "Just now they are talking about you and your father."

Pierre smiled in his good-natured way as if afraid for his companion's sake that the latter might say something he would afterwards regret. But Borís spoke distinctly, clearly, and dryly, looking straight into Pierre's eyes.

"Moscow has nothing else to do but gossip," Borís went on. "Everybody is wondering to whom the count will leave his fortune, though he may perhaps outlive us all, as I sincerely hope he will..."

"Yes, it is all very horrid," interrupted Pierre, "very horrid."

Pierre was still afraid that this officer might inadvertently say something disconcerting to himself.

"And it must seem to you," said Borís flushing slightly, but not changing his tone or attitude, "it must seem to you that everyone is trying to get something out of the rich man?"

"So it does," thought Pierre.

"But I just wish to say, to avoid misunderstandings, that you are quite mistaken if you reckon me or my mother among such people. We are very poor, but for my own part at any rate, for the very reason that your father is rich, I don't regard myself as a relation of his, and neither I nor my mother would ever ask or take anything from him."

For a long time Pierre could not understand, but when he did, he jumped up from the sofa, seized Borís under the elbow in his quick, clumsy way, and, blushing far more than Borís, began to speak with a feeling of mingled shame and vexation.

"Well, this is strange! Do you suppose I... who could think?... I know very well..."

But Borís again interrupted him.

"I am glad I have spoken out fully. Perhaps you did not like it? You must excuse me," said he, putting Pierre at ease instead of being put at ease by him, "but I hope I have not offended you. I always make it a rule to speak out... Well, what answer am I to take? Will you come to dinner at the Rostóvs'?"

And Borís, having apparently relieved himself of an onerous duty and extricated himself from an awkward situation and placed another in it, became quite pleasant again.

“No, but I say,” said Pierre, calming down, “you are a wonderful fellow! What you have just said is good, very good. Of course you don’t know me. We have not met for such a long time... not since we were children. You might think that I... I understand, quite understand. I could not have done it myself, I should not have had the courage, but it’s splendid. I am very glad to have made your acquaintance. It’s queer,” he added after a pause, “that you should have suspected me!” He began to laugh. “Well, what of it! I hope we’ll get better acquainted,” and he pressed Borís’ hand. “Do you know, I have not once been in to see the count. He has not sent for me.... I am sorry for him as a man, but what can one do?”

“And so you think Napoleon will manage to get an army across?” asked Borís with a smile.

Pierre saw that Borís wished to change the subject, and being of the same mind he began explaining the advantages and disadvantages of the Boulogne expedition.

A footman came in to summon Borís—the princess was going. Pierre, in order to make Borís’ better acquaintance, promised to come to dinner, and warmly pressing his hand looked affectionately over his spectacles into Borís’ eyes. After he had gone Pierre continued pacing up and down the room for a long time, no longer piercing an imaginary foe with his imaginary sword, but smiling at the remembrance of that pleasant, intelligent, and resolute young man.

As often happens in early youth, especially to one who leads a lonely life, he felt an unaccountable tenderness for this young man and made up his mind that they would be friends.

Prince Vasíli saw the princess off. She held a handkerchief to her eyes and her face was tearful.

“It is dreadful, dreadful!” she was saying, “but cost me what it may I shall do my duty. I will come and spend the night. He must not be left like this. Every moment is precious. I can’t think why his nieces put it off. Perhaps God will help me to find a way to prepare him!... Adieu, Prince! May God support you...”

“Adieu, ma bonne,” answered Prince Vasíli turning away from her.

“Oh, he is in a dreadful state,” said the mother to her son when they were in the carriage. “He hardly recognizes anybody.”

“I don’t understand, Mamma—what is his attitude to Pierre?” asked the son.

“The will will show that, my dear; our fate also depends on it.”

“But why do you expect that he will leave us anything?”

“Ah, my dear! He is so rich, and we are so poor!”

“Well, that is hardly a sufficient reason, Mamma...”

“Oh, Heaven! How ill he is!” exclaimed the mother.