

CHAPTER XVIII

Countess Rostóva, with her daughters and a large number of guests, was already seated in the drawing room. The count took the gentlemen into his study and showed them his choice collection of Turkish pipes. From time to time he went out to ask: "Hasn't she come yet?" They were expecting Márya Dmítrievna Akhrosímova, known in society as le terrible dragon, a lady distinguished not for wealth or rank, but for common sense and frank plainness of speech. Márya Dmítrievna was known to the Imperial family as well as to all Moscow and Petersburg, and both cities wondered at her, laughed privately at her rudenesses, and told good stories about her, while none the less all without exception respected and feared her.

In the count's room, which was full of tobacco smoke, they talked of the war that had been announced in a manifesto, and about the recruiting. None of them had yet seen the manifesto, but they all knew it had appeared. The count sat on the sofa between two guests who were smoking and talking. He neither smoked nor talked, but bending his head first to one side and then to the other watched the smokers with evident pleasure and listened to the conversation of his two neighbors, whom he egged on against each other.

One of them was a sallow, clean-shaven civilian with a thin and wrinkled face, already growing old, though he was dressed like a most fashionable young man. He sat with his legs up on the sofa as if quite at home and, having stuck an amber mouthpiece far into his mouth, was inhaling the smoke spasmodically and screwing up his eyes. This was an old bachelor, Shinshín, a cousin of the countess', a man with "a sharp tongue" as they said in Moscow society. He seemed to be condescending to his companion. The latter, a fresh, rosy officer of the Guards, irreproachably washed, brushed, and buttoned, held his pipe in the middle of his mouth and with red lips gently inhaled the smoke, letting it escape from his handsome mouth in rings. This was Lieutenant Berg, an officer in the Semënov regiment with whom Borís was to travel to join the army, and about whom Natásha had teased her elder sister Véra, speaking of Berg as her "intended." The count sat between them and listened attentively. His favorite occupation when not playing boston, a card game he was very fond of, was that of listener, especially when he succeeded in setting two loquacious talkers at one another.

"Well, then, old chap, mon très honorable Alphonse Kárlovich," said Shinshín, laughing ironically and mixing the most ordinary Russian expressions with the choicest French phrases—which was a peculiarity of his speech. "Vous comptez vous faire des rentes sur l'état; * you want to make something out of your company?"

* You expect to make an income out of the government.

"No, Peter Nikoláevich; I only want to show that in the cavalry the advantages are far less than in the infantry. Just consider my own position now, Peter Nikoláevich..."

Berg always spoke quietly, politely, and with great precision. His conversation always related entirely to himself; he would remain calm and silent when the talk related to any topic that had no direct bearing on himself. He could remain silent for hours without being at all put out of countenance himself or making others uncomfortable, but as soon as the conversation concerned himself he would begin to talk circumstantially and with evident satisfaction.

“Consider my position, Peter Nikoláevich. Were I in the cavalry I should get not more than two hundred rubles every four months, even with the rank of lieutenant; but as it is I receive two hundred and thirty,” said he, looking at Shinshín and the count with a joyful, pleasant smile, as if it were obvious to him that his success must always be the chief desire of everyone else.

“Besides that, Peter Nikoláevich, by exchanging into the Guards I shall be in a more prominent position,” continued Berg, “and vacancies occur much more frequently in the Foot Guards. Then just think what can be done with two hundred and thirty rubles! I even manage to put a little aside and to send something to my father,” he went on, emitting a smoke ring.

“La balance y est... * A German knows how to skin a flint, as the proverb says,” remarked Shinshín, moving his pipe to the other side of his mouth and winking at the count.

* So that squares matters.

The count burst out laughing. The other guests seeing that Shinshín was talking came up to listen. Berg, oblivious of irony or indifference, continued to explain how by exchanging into the Guards he had already gained a step on his old comrades of the Cadet Corps; how in wartime the company commander might get killed and he, as senior in the company, might easily succeed to the post; how popular he was with everyone in the regiment, and how satisfied his father was with him. Berg evidently enjoyed narrating all this, and did not seem to suspect that others, too, might have their own interests. But all he said was so prettily sedate, and the naïveté of his youthful egotism was so obvious, that he disarmed his hearers.

“Well, my boy, you’ll get along wherever you go—foot or horse—that I’ll warrant,” said Shinshín, patting him on the shoulder and taking his feet off the sofa.

Berg smiled joyously. The count, followed by his guests, went into the drawing room.

It was just the moment before a big dinner when the assembled guests, expecting the summons to zakúska, * avoid engaging in any long conversation but think it necessary to move about and talk, in order to show that they are not at all impatient for their food. The host and hostess look toward the door, and now and then glance at one another, and the visitors try to guess from these glances who, or what, they are waiting for—some important relation who has not yet arrived, or a dish

that is not yet ready.

* Hors d'oeuvres.

Pierre had come just at dinnertime and was sitting awkwardly in the middle of the drawing room on the first chair he had come across, blocking the way for everyone. The countess tried to make him talk, but he went on naïvely looking around through his spectacles as if in search of somebody and answered all her questions in monosyllables. He was in the way and was the only one who did not notice the fact. Most of the guests, knowing of the affair with the bear, looked with curiosity at this big, stout, quiet man, wondering how such a clumsy, modest fellow could have played such a prank on a policeman.

“You have only lately arrived?” the countess asked him.

“Oui, madame,” replied he, looking around him.

“You have not yet seen my husband?”

“Non, madame.” He smiled quite inappropriately.

“You have been in Paris recently, I believe? I suppose it’s very interesting.”

“Very interesting.”

The countess exchanged glances with Anna Mikháylovna. The latter understood that she was being asked to entertain this young man, and sitting down beside him she began to speak about his father; but he answered her, as he had the countess, only in monosyllables. The other guests were all conversing with one another. “The Razumóvskis... It was charming... You are very kind... Countess Apráksina...” was heard on all sides. The countess rose and went into the ballroom.

“Márya Dmítrievna?” came her voice from there.

“Herself,” came the answer in a rough voice, and Márya Dmítrievna entered the room.

All the unmarried ladies and even the married ones except the very oldest rose. Márya Dmítrievna paused at the door. Tall and stout, holding high her fifty-year-old head with its gray curls, she stood surveying the guests, and leisurely arranged her wide sleeves as if rolling them up. Márya Dmítrievna always spoke in Russian.

“Health and happiness to her whose name day we are keeping and to her children,” she said, in her loud, full-toned voice which drowned all others. “Well, you old sinner,” she went on, turning to the count who was kissing her hand, “you’re feeling dull in Moscow, I daresay? Nowhere to hunt with your dogs? But what is to be done, old man? Just see how these nestlings are growing up,” and she pointed to the girls. “You must look for husbands for them whether you like it or not....”

“Well,” said she, “how’s my Cossack?” (Márya Dmítrievna always called Natásha a Cossack) and she stroked the child’s arm as she came up fearless and gay to kiss her hand. “I know she’s a scamp of a girl, but I like her.”

She took a pair of pear-shaped ruby earrings from her huge reticule and, having given them to the rosy Natásha, who beamed with the pleasure of her saint’s-day fete, turned away at once and addressed herself to Pierre.

“Eh, eh, friend! Come here a bit,” said she, assuming a soft high tone of voice. “Come here, my friend...” and she ominously tucked up her sleeves still higher. Pierre approached, looking at her in a childlike way through his spectacles.

“Come nearer, come nearer, friend! I used to be the only one to tell your father the truth when he was in favor, and in your case it’s my evident duty.” She paused. All were silent, expectant of what was to follow, for this was clearly only a prelude.

“A fine lad! My word! A fine lad!... His father lies on his deathbed and he amuses himself setting a policeman astride a bear! For shame, sir, for shame! It would be better if you went to the war.”

She turned away and gave her hand to the count, who could hardly keep from laughing.

“Well, I suppose it is time we were at table?” said Márya Dmítrievna.

The count went in first with Márya Dmítrievna, the countess followed on the arm of a colonel of hussars, a man of importance to them because Nicholas was to go with him to the regiment; then came Anna Mikháylovna with Shinshín. Berg gave his arm to Véra. The smiling Julie Karágina went in with Nicholas. After them other couples followed, filling the whole dining hall, and last of all the children, tutors, and governesses followed singly. The footmen began moving about, chairs scraped, the band struck up in the gallery, and the guests settled down in their places. Then the strains of the count’s household band were replaced by the clatter of knives and forks, the voices of visitors, and the soft steps of the footmen. At one end of the table sat the countess with Márya Dmítrievna on her right and Anna Mikháylovna on her left, the other lady visitors were farther down. At the other end sat the count, with the hussar colonel on his left and Shinshín and the other male visitors on his right. Midway down the long table on one side sat the grown-up young people: Véra beside Berg, and Pierre beside Borís; and on the other side, the children, tutors, and governesses. From behind the crystal decanters and fruit vases, the count kept glancing at his wife and her tall cap with its light-blue ribbons, and busily filled his neighbors’ glasses, not neglecting his own. The countess in turn, without omitting her duties as hostess, threw significant glances from behind the pineapples at her husband whose face and bald head seemed by their redness to contrast more than usual with his gray hair. At the ladies’ end an even chatter of voices was heard all the time, at the

men's end the voices sounded louder and louder, especially that of the colonel of hussars who, growing more and more flushed, ate and drank so much that the count held him up as a pattern to the other guests. Berg with tender smiles was saying to Véra that love is not an earthly but a heavenly feeling. Borís was telling his new friend Pierre who the guests were and exchanging glances with Natásha, who was sitting opposite. Pierre spoke little but examined the new faces, and ate a great deal. Of the two soups he chose turtle with savory patties and went on to the game without omitting a single dish or one of the wines. These latter the butler thrust mysteriously forward, wrapped in a napkin, from behind the next man's shoulders and whispered: "Dry Madeira"... "Hungarian"... or "Rhine wine" as the case might be. Of the four crystal glasses engraved with the count's monogram that stood before his plate, Pierre held out one at random and drank with enjoyment, gazing with ever-increasing amiability at the other guests. Natásha, who sat opposite, was looking at Borís as girls of thirteen look at the boy they are in love with and have just kissed for the first time. Sometimes that same look fell on Pierre, and that funny lively little girl's look made him inclined to laugh without knowing why.

Nicholas sat at some distance from Sónya, beside Julie Karágina, to whom he was again talking with the same involuntary smile. Sónya wore a company smile but was evidently tormented by jealousy; now she turned pale, now blushed and strained every nerve to overhear what Nicholas and Julie were saying to one another. The governess kept looking round uneasily as if preparing to resent any slight that might be put upon the children. The German tutor was trying to remember all the dishes, wines, and kinds of dessert, in order to send a full description of the dinner to his people in Germany; and he felt greatly offended when the butler with a bottle wrapped in a napkin passed him by. He frowned, trying to appear as if he did not want any of that wine, but was mortified because no one would understand that it was not to quench his thirst or from greediness that he wanted it, but simply from a conscientious desire for knowledge.