

CHAPTER XIX

At the men's end of the table the talk grew more and more animated. The colonel told them that the declaration of war had already appeared in Petersburg and that a copy, which he had himself seen, had that day been forwarded by courier to the commander in chief.

“And why the deuce are we going to fight Bonaparte?” remarked Shinshín. “He has stopped Austria's cackle and I fear it will be our turn next.”

The colonel was a stout, tall, plethoric German, evidently devoted to the service and patriotically Russian. He resented Shinshín's remark.

“It is for the reasson, my goot sir,” said he, speaking with a German accent, “for the reasson zat ze Emperor knows zat. He declares in ze manifessto zat he cannot fiew wiz indifference ze danger vreatening Russia and zat ze safety and dignity of ze Empire as vell as ze sanctity of its alliances...” he spoke this last word with particular emphasis as if in it lay the gist of the matter.

Then with the unerring official memory that characterized him he repeated from the opening words of the manifesto:

... and the wish, which constitutes the Emperor's sole and absolute aim—to establish peace in Europe on firm foundations—has now decided him to despatch part of the army abroad and to create a new condition for the attainment of that purpose.

“Zat, my dear sir, is vy...” he concluded, drinking a tumbler of wine with dignity and looking to the count for approval.

“Connaissez-vous le Proverbe:* ‘Jerome, Jerome, do not roam, but turn spindles at home!’?” said Shinshín, puckering his brows and smiling. “Cela nous convient à merveille.*(2) Suvórov now—he knew what he was about; yet they beat him à plate couture,*(3) and where are we to find Suvórovs now? Je vous demande un peu,” *(4) said he, continually changing from French to Russian.

*Do you know the proverb?

*(2) That suits us down to the ground.

*(3) Hollow.

*(4) I just ask you that.

“Ve must vight to the last tr-r-op of our plood!” said the colonel, thumping the table; “and ve must tie for our Emperor, and zen all vill pe vell. And ve must discuss it as little as po-o-ossible”... he dwelt particularly on the word possible... “as po-o-ossible,” he ended, again turning to the count. “Zat is how ve old hussars look at it, and zere's an end of it! And how do you, a young man and a young hussar,

how do you judge of it?" he added, addressing Nicholas, who when he heard that the war was being discussed had turned from his partner with eyes and ears intent on the colonel.

"I am quite of your opinion," replied Nicholas, flaming up, turning his plate round and moving his wineglasses about with as much decision and desperation as though he were at that moment facing some great danger. "I am convinced that we Russians must die or conquer," he concluded, conscious—as were others—after the words were uttered that his remarks were too enthusiastic and emphatic for the occasion and were therefore awkward.

"What you said just now was splendid!" said his partner Julie.

Sónya trembled all over and blushed to her ears and behind them and down to her neck and shoulders while Nicholas was speaking.

Pierre listened to the colonel's speech and nodded approvingly.

"That's fine," said he.

"The young man's a real hussar!" shouted the colonel, again thumping the table.

"What are you making such a noise about over there?" Márya Dmítrievna's deep voice suddenly inquired from the other end of the table. "What are you thumping the table for?" she demanded of the hussar, "and why are you exciting yourself? Do you think the French are here?"

"I am speaking ze truce," replied the hussar with a smile.

"It's all about the war," the count shouted down the table. "You know my son's going, Márya Dmítrievna? My son is going."

"I have four sons in the army but still I don't fret. It is all in God's hands. You may die in your bed or God may spare you in a battle," replied Márya Dmítrievna's deep voice, which easily carried the whole length of the table.

"That's true!"

Once more the conversations concentrated, the ladies' at the one end and the men's at the other.

"You won't ask," Natásha's little brother was saying; "I know you won't ask!"

"I will," replied Natásha.

Her face suddenly flushed with reckless and joyous resolution. She half rose, by a glance inviting Pierre, who sat opposite, to listen to what was coming, and turning to her mother:

“Mamma!” rang out the clear contralto notes of her childish voice, audible the whole length of the table.

“What is it?” asked the countess, startled; but seeing by her daughter’s face that it was only mischief, she shook a finger at her sternly with a threatening and forbidding movement of her head.

The conversation was hushed.

“Mamma! What sweets are we going to have?” and Natásha’s voice sounded still more firm and resolute.

The countess tried to frown, but could not. Márya Dmítrievna shook her fat finger.

“Cossack!” she said threateningly.

Most of the guests, uncertain how to regard this sally, looked at the elders.

“You had better take care!” said the countess.

“Mamma! What sweets are we going to have?” Natásha again cried boldly, with saucy gaiety, confident that her prank would be taken in good part.

Sónya and fat little Pétya doubled up with laughter.

“You see! I have asked,” whispered Natásha to her little brother and to Pierre, glancing at him again.

“Ice pudding, but you won’t get any,” said Márya Dmítrievna.

Natásha saw there was nothing to be afraid of and so she braved even Márya Dmítrievna.

“Márya Dmítrievna! What kind of ice pudding? I don’t like ice cream.”

“Carrot ices.”

“No! What kind, Márya Dmítrievna? What kind?” she almost screamed; “I want to know!”

Márya Dmítrievna and the countess burst out laughing, and all the guests joined in. Everyone laughed, not at Márya Dmítrievna’s answer but at the incredible boldness and smartness of this little girl who had dared to treat Márya Dmítrievna in this fashion.

Natásha only desisted when she had been told that there would be pineapple ice. Before the ices, champagne was served round. The band again struck up, the count and countess kissed, and the guests, leaving their seats, went up to “congratulate” the countess, and reached across the table to clink glasses with the count, with the children, and

with one another. Again the footmen rushed about, chairs scraped, and in the same order in which they had entered but with redder faces, the guests returned to the drawing room and to the count's study.