

CHAPTER XXIV

There was now no one in the reception room except Prince Vasíli and the eldest princess, who were sitting under the portrait of Catherine the Great and talking eagerly. As soon as they saw Pierre and his companion they became silent, and Pierre thought he saw the princess hide something as she whispered:

“I can’t bear the sight of that woman.”

“Catiche has had tea served in the small drawing room,” said Prince Vasíli to Anna Mikháylovna. “Go and take something, my poor Anna Mikháylovna, or you will not hold out.”

To Pierre he said nothing, merely giving his arm a sympathetic squeeze below the shoulder. Pierre went with Anna Mikháylovna into the small drawing room.

“There is nothing so refreshing after a sleepless night as a cup of this delicious Russian tea,” Lorrain was saying with an air of restrained animation as he stood sipping tea from a delicate Chinese handleless cup before a table on which tea and a cold supper were laid in the small circular room. Around the table all who were at Count Bezúkhov’s house that night had gathered to fortify themselves. Pierre well remembered this small circular drawing room with its mirrors and little tables. During balls given at the house Pierre, who did not know how to dance, had liked sitting in this room to watch the ladies who, as they passed through in their ball dresses with diamonds and pearls on their bare shoulders, looked at themselves in the brilliantly lighted mirrors which repeated their reflections several times. Now this same room was dimly lighted by two candles. On one small table tea things and supper dishes stood in disorder, and in the middle of the night a motley throng of people sat there, not merrymaking, but somberly whispering, and betraying by every word and movement that they none of them forgot what was happening and what was about to happen in the bedroom. Pierre did not eat anything though he would very much have liked to. He looked inquiringly at his mistress and saw that she was again going on tiptoe to the reception room where they had left Prince Vasíli and the eldest princess. Pierre concluded that this also was essential, and after a short interval followed her. Anna Mikháylovna was standing beside the princess, and they were both speaking in excited whispers.

“Permit me, Princess, to know what is necessary and what is not necessary,” said the younger of the two speakers, evidently in the same state of excitement as when she had slammed the door of her room.

“But, my dear princess,” answered Anna Mikháylovna blandly but impressively, blocking the way to the bedroom and preventing the other from passing, “won’t this be too much for poor Uncle at a moment when he needs repose? Worldly conversation at a moment when his soul is already prepared...”

Prince Vasíli was seated in an easy chair in his familiar attitude, with one leg crossed high above the other. His cheeks, which were so flabby that they looked heavier below, were twitching violently; but he wore the air of a man little concerned in what the two ladies were saying.

“Come, my dear Anna Mikháylovna, let Catiche do as she pleases. You know how fond the count is of her.”

“I don’t even know what is in this paper,” said the younger of the two ladies, addressing Prince Vasíli and pointing to an inlaid portfolio she held in her hand. “All I know is that his real will is in his writing table, and this is a paper he has forgotten....”

She tried to pass Anna Mikháylovna, but the latter sprang so as to bar her path.

“I know, my dear, kind princess,” said Anna Mikháylovna, seizing the portfolio so firmly that it was plain she would not let go easily. “Dear princess, I beg and implore you, have some pity on him! Je vous en conjure...”

The princess did not reply. Their efforts in the struggle for the portfolio were the only sounds audible, but it was evident that if the princess did speak, her words would not be flattering to Anna Mikháylovna. Though the latter held on tenaciously, her voice lost none of its honeyed firmness and softness.

“Pierre, my dear, come here. I think he will not be out of place in a family consultation; is it not so, Prince?”

“Why don’t you speak, cousin?” suddenly shrieked the princess so loud that those in the drawing room heard her and were startled. “Why do you remain silent when heaven knows who permits herself to interfere, making a scene on the very threshold of a dying man’s room? Intriguer!” she hissed viciously, and tugged with all her might at the portfolio.

But Anna Mikháylovna went forward a step or two to keep her hold on the portfolio, and changed her grip.

Prince Vasíli rose. “Oh!” said he with reproach and surprise, “this is absurd! Come, let go I tell you.”

The princess let go.

“And you too!”

But Anna Mikháylovna did not obey him.

“Let go, I tell you! I will take the responsibility. I myself will go and ask him, I!... does that satisfy you?”

“But, Prince,” said Anna Mikháylovna, “after such a solemn

sacrament, allow him a moment's peace! Here, Pierre, tell them your opinion," said she, turning to the young man who, having come quite close, was gazing with astonishment at the angry face of the princess which had lost all dignity, and at the twitching cheeks of Prince Vasíli.

"Remember that you will answer for the consequences," said Prince Vasíli severely. "You don't know what you are doing."

"Vile woman!" shouted the princess, darting unexpectedly at Anna Mikháylovna and snatching the portfolio from her.

Prince Vasíli bent his head and spread out his hands.

At this moment that terrible door, which Pierre had watched so long and which had always opened so quietly, burst noisily open and banged against the wall, and the second of the three sisters rushed out wringing her hands.

"What are you doing!" she cried vehemently. "He is dying and you leave me alone with him!"

Her sister dropped the portfolio. Anna Mikháylovna, stooping, quickly caught up the object of contention and ran into the bedroom. The eldest princess and Prince Vasíli, recovering themselves, followed her. A few minutes later the eldest sister came out with a pale hard face, again biting her underlip. At sight of Pierre her expression showed an irrepressible hatred.

"Yes, now you may be glad!" said she; "this is what you have been waiting for." And bursting into tears she hid her face in her handkerchief and rushed from the room.

Prince Vasíli came next. He staggered to the sofa on which Pierre was sitting and dropped onto it, covering his face with his hand. Pierre noticed that he was pale and that his jaw quivered and shook as if in an ague.

"Ah, my friend!" said he, taking Pierre by the elbow; and there was in his voice a sincerity and weakness Pierre had never observed in it before. "How often we sin, how much we deceive, and all for what? I am near sixty, dear friend... I too... All will end in death, all! Death is awful..." and he burst into tears.

Anna Mikháylovna came out last. She approached Pierre with slow, quiet steps.

"Pierre!" she said.

Pierre gave her an inquiring look. She kissed the young man on his forehead, wetting him with her tears. Then after a pause she said:

"He is no more...."

Pierre looked at her over his spectacles.

“Come, I will go with you. Try to weep, nothing gives such relief as tears.”

She led him into the dark drawing room and Pierre was glad no one could see his face. Anna Mikháylovna left him, and when she returned he was fast asleep with his head on his arm.

In the morning Anna Mikháylovna said to Pierre:

“Yes, my dear, this is a great loss for us all, not to speak of you. But God will support you: you are young, and are now, I hope, in command of an immense fortune. The will has not yet been opened. I know you well enough to be sure that this will not turn your head, but it imposes duties on you, and you must be a man.”

Pierre was silent.

“Perhaps later on I may tell you, my dear boy, that if I had not been there, God only knows what would have happened! You know, Uncle promised me only the day before yesterday not to forget Borís. But he had no time. I hope, my dear friend, you will carry out your father’s wish?”

Pierre understood nothing of all this and coloring shyly looked in silence at Princess Anna Mikháylovna. After her talk with Pierre, Anna Mikháylovna returned to the Rostóvs’ and went to bed. On waking in the morning she told the Rostóvs and all her acquaintances the details of Count Bezúkhov’s death. She said the count had died as she would herself wish to die, that his end was not only touching but edifying. As to the last meeting between father and son, it was so touching that she could not think of it without tears, and did not know which had behaved better during those awful moments—the father who so remembered everything and everybody at last and had spoken such pathetic words to the son, or Pierre, whom it had been pitiful to see, so stricken was he with grief, though he tried hard to hide it in order not to sadden his dying father. “It is painful, but it does one good. It uplifts the soul to see such men as the old count and his worthy son,” said she. Of the behavior of the eldest princess and Prince Vasíli she spoke disapprovingly, but in whispers and as a great secret.