

CHAPTER XXVII

At the appointed hour the prince, powdered and shaven, entered the dining room where his daughter-in-law, Princess Mary, and Mademoiselle Bourienne were already awaiting him together with his architect, who by a strange caprice of his employer's was admitted to table though the position of that insignificant individual was such as could certainly not have caused him to expect that honor. The prince, who generally kept very strictly to social distinctions and rarely admitted even important government officials to his table, had unexpectedly selected Michael Ivánovich (who always went into a corner to blow his nose on his checked handkerchief) to illustrate the theory that all men are equals, and had more than once impressed on his daughter that Michael Ivánovich was "not a whit worse than you or I." At dinner the prince usually spoke to the taciturn Michael Ivánovich more often than to anyone else.

In the dining room, which like all the rooms in the house was exceedingly lofty, the members of the household and the footmen—one behind each chair—stood waiting for the prince to enter. The head butler, napkin on arm, was scanning the setting of the table, making signs to the footmen, and anxiously glancing from the clock to the door by which the prince was to enter. Prince Andrew was looking at a large gilt frame, new to him, containing the genealogical tree of the Princes Bolkónski, opposite which hung another such frame with a badly painted portrait (evidently by the hand of the artist belonging to the estate) of a ruling prince, in a crown—an alleged descendant of Rúrik and ancestor of the Bolkónskis. Prince Andrew, looking again at that genealogical tree, shook his head, laughing as a man laughs who looks at a portrait so characteristic of the original as to be amusing.

"How thoroughly like him that is!" he said to Princess Mary, who had come up to him.

Princess Mary looked at her brother in surprise. She did not understand what he was laughing at. Everything her father did inspired her with reverence and was beyond question.

"Everyone has his Achilles' heel," continued Prince Andrew.
"Fancy, with his powerful mind, indulging in such nonsense!"

Princess Mary could not understand the boldness of her brother's criticism and was about to reply, when the expected footsteps were heard coming from the study. The prince walked in quickly and jauntily as was his wont, as if intentionally contrasting the briskness of his manners with the strict formality of his house. At that moment the great clock struck two and another with a shrill tone joined in from the drawing room. The prince stood still; his lively glittering eyes from under their thick, bushy eyebrows sternly scanned all present and rested on the little princess. She felt, as courtiers do when the Tsar enters, the sensation of fear and respect which the old man inspired in all around him. He stroked her hair and then patted her awkwardly on the back of her neck.

“I’m glad, glad, to see you,” he said, looking attentively into her eyes, and then quickly went to his place and sat down. “Sit down, sit down! Sit down, Michael Ivánovich!”

He indicated a place beside him to his daughter-in-law. A footman moved the chair for her.

“Ho, ho!” said the old man, casting his eyes on her rounded figure. “You’ve been in a hurry. That’s bad!”

He laughed in his usual dry, cold, unpleasant way, with his lips only and not with his eyes.

“You must walk, walk as much as possible, as much as possible,” he said.

The little princess did not, or did not wish to, hear his words. She was silent and seemed confused. The prince asked her about her father, and she began to smile and talk. He asked about mutual acquaintances, and she became still more animated and chattered away giving him greetings from various people and retelling the town gossip.

“Countess Apráksina, poor thing, has lost her husband and she has cried her eyes out,” she said, growing more and more lively.

As she became animated the prince looked at her more and more sternly, and suddenly, as if he had studied her sufficiently and had formed a definite idea of her, he turned away and addressed Michael Ivánovich.

“Well, Michael Ivánovich, our Bonaparte will be having a bad time of it. Prince Andrew” (he always spoke thus of his son) “has been telling me what forces are being collected against him! While you and I never thought much of him.”

Michael Ivánovich did not at all know when “you and I” had said such things about Bonaparte, but understanding that he was wanted as a peg on which to hang the prince’s favorite topic, he looked inquiringly at the young prince, wondering what would follow.

“He is a great tactician!” said the prince to his son, pointing to the architect.

And the conversation again turned on the war, on Bonaparte, and the generals and statesmen of the day. The old prince seemed convinced not only that all the men of the day were mere babies who did not know the A B C of war or of politics, and that Bonaparte was an insignificant little Frenchy, successful only because there were no longer any Potëmkins or Suvórovs left to oppose him; but he was also convinced that there were no political difficulties in Europe and no real war, but only a sort of puppet show at which the men of the day were playing, pretending to do something real. Prince Andrew gaily bore with his father’s ridicule of the new men, and drew him on and listened to him with evident pleasure.

“The past always seems good,” said he, “but did not Suvórov himself fall into a trap Moreau set him, and from which he did not know how to escape?”

“Who told you that? Who?” cried the prince. “Suvórov!” And he jerked away his plate, which Tíkhon briskly caught. “Suvórov!... Consider, Prince Andrew. Two... Frederick and Suvórov; Moreau!... Moreau would have been a prisoner if Suvórov had had a free hand; but he had the Hofs-kriegs-wurst-schnapps-Rath on his hands. It would have puzzled the devil himself! When you get there you’ll find out what those Hofs-kriegs-wurst-Raths are! Suvórov couldn’t manage them so what chance has Michael Kutúzov? No, my dear boy,” he continued, “you and your generals won’t get on against Buonaparte; you’ll have to call in the French, so that birds of a feather may fight together. The German, Pahlen, has been sent to New York in America, to fetch the Frenchman, Moreau,” he said, alluding to the invitation made that year to Moreau to enter the Russian service.... “Wonderful!... Were the Potëmkins, Suvórovs, and Orlóvs Germans? No, lad, either you fellows have all lost your wits, or I have outlived mine. May God help you, but we’ll see what will happen. Buonaparte has become a great commander among them! Hm!...”

“I don’t at all say that all the plans are good,” said Prince Andrew, “I am only surprised at your opinion of Bonaparte. You may laugh as much as you like, but all the same Bonaparte is a great general!”

“Michael Ivánovich!” cried the old prince to the architect who, busy with his roast meat, hoped he had been forgotten: “Didn’t I tell you Buonaparte was a great tactician? Here, he says the same thing.”

“To be sure, your excellency,” replied the architect.

The prince again laughed his frigid laugh.

“Buonaparte was born with a silver spoon in his mouth. He has got splendid soldiers. Besides he began by attacking Germans. And only idlers have failed to beat the Germans. Since the world began everybody has beaten the Germans. They beat no one—except one another. He made his reputation fighting them.”

And the prince began explaining all the blunders which, according to him, Bonaparte had made in his campaigns and even in politics. His son made no rejoinder, but it was evident that whatever arguments were presented he was as little able as his father to change his opinion. He listened, refraining from a reply, and involuntarily wondered how this old man, living alone in the country for so many years, could know and discuss so minutely and acutely all the recent European military and political events.

“You think I’m an old man and don’t understand the present state of affairs?” concluded his father. “But it troubles me. I don’t sleep at night. Come now, where has this great commander of yours shown

his skill?" he concluded.

"That would take too long to tell," answered the son.

"Well, then go off to your Buonaparte! Mademoiselle Bourienne, here's another admirer of that powder-monkey emperor of yours," he exclaimed in excellent French.

"You know, Prince, I am not a Bonapartist!"

"Dieu sait quand reviendra." hummed the prince out of tune and, with a laugh still more so, he quitted the table.

The little princess during the whole discussion and the rest of the dinner sat silent, glancing with a frightened look now at her father-in-law and now at Princess Mary. When they left the table she took her sister-in-law's arm and drew her into another room.

"What a clever man your father is," said she; "perhaps that is why I am afraid of him."

"Oh, he is so kind!" answered Princess Mary.