

CHAPTER II

In November, 1805, Prince Vasíli had to go on a tour of inspection in four different provinces. He had arranged this for himself so as to visit his neglected estates at the same time and pick up his son Anatole where his regiment was stationed, and take him to visit Prince Nicholas Bolkónski in order to arrange a match for him with the daughter of that rich old man. But before leaving home and undertaking these new affairs, Prince Vasíli had to settle matters with Pierre, who, it is true, had latterly spent whole days at home, that is, in Prince Vasíli's house where he was staying, and had been absurd, excited, and foolish in Héléne's presence (as a lover should be), but had not yet proposed to her.

"This is all very fine, but things must be settled," said Prince Vasíli to himself, with a sorrowful sigh, one morning, feeling that Pierre who was under such obligations to him ("But never mind that") was not behaving very well in this matter. "Youth, frivolity... well, God be with him," thought he, relishing his own goodness of heart, "but it must be brought to a head. The day after tomorrow will be Lëlya's name day. I will invite two or three people, and if he does not understand what he ought to do then it will be my affair—yes, my affair. I am her father."

Six weeks after Anna Pávlovna's "At Home" and after the sleepless night when he had decided that to marry Héléne would be a calamity and that he ought to avoid her and go away, Pierre, despite that decision, had not left Prince Vasíli's and felt with terror that in people's eyes he was every day more and more connected with her, that it was impossible for him to return to his former conception of her, that he could not break away from her, and that though it would be a terrible thing he would have to unite his fate with hers. He might perhaps have been able to free himself but that Prince Vasíli (who had rarely before given receptions) now hardly let a day go by without having an evening party at which Pierre had to be present unless he wished to spoil the general pleasure and disappoint everyone's expectation. Prince Vasíli, in the rare moments when he was at home, would take Pierre's hand in passing and draw it downwards, or absent-mindedly hold out his wrinkled, clean-shaven cheek for Pierre to kiss and would say: "Till tomorrow," or, "Be in to dinner or I shall not see you," or, "I am staying in for your sake," and so on. And though Prince Vasíli, when he stayed in (as he said) for Pierre's sake, hardly exchanged a couple of words with him, Pierre felt unable to disappoint him. Every day he said to himself one and the same thing: "It is time I understood her and made up my mind what she really is. Was I mistaken before, or am I mistaken now? No, she is not stupid, she is an excellent girl," he sometimes said to himself "she never makes a mistake, never says anything stupid. She says little, but what she does say is always clear and simple, so she is not stupid. She never was abashed and is not abashed now, so she cannot be a bad woman!" He had often begun to make reflections or think aloud in her company, and she had always answered him either by a brief but appropriate remark—showing that it did not interest her—or by a silent look and smile which more palpably

than anything else showed Pierre her superiority. She was right in regarding all arguments as nonsense in comparison with that smile.

She always addressed him with a radiantly confiding smile meant for him alone, in which there was something more significant than in the general smile that usually brightened her face. Pierre knew that everyone was waiting for him to say a word and cross a certain line, and he knew that sooner or later he would step across it, but an incomprehensible terror seized him at the thought of that dreadful step. A thousand times during that month and a half while he felt himself drawn nearer and nearer to that dreadful abyss, Pierre said to himself: "What am I doing? I need resolution. Can it be that I have none?"

He wished to take a decision, but felt with dismay that in this matter he lacked that strength of will which he had known in himself and really possessed. Pierre was one of those who are only strong when they feel themselves quite innocent, and since that day when he was overpowered by a feeling of desire while stooping over the snuffbox at Anna Pávlovna's, an unacknowledged sense of the guilt of that desire paralyzed his will.

On Héléne's name day, a small party of just their own people—as his wife said—met for supper at Prince Vasíli's. All these friends and relations had been given to understand that the fate of the young girl would be decided that evening. The visitors were seated at supper. Princess Kurágina, a portly imposing woman who had once been handsome, was sitting at the head of the table. On either side of her sat the more important guests—an old general and his wife, and Anna Pávlovna Schérer. At the other end sat the younger and less important guests, and there too sat the members of the family, and Pierre and Héléne, side by side. Prince Vasíli was not having any supper: he went round the table in a merry mood, sitting down now by one, now by another, of the guests. To each of them he made some careless and agreeable remark except to Pierre and Héléne, whose presence he seemed not to notice. He enlivened the whole party. The wax candles burned brightly, the silver and crystal gleamed, so did the ladies' toilets and the gold and silver of the men's epaulets; servants in scarlet liveries moved round the table, the clatter of plates, knives, and glasses mingled with the animated hum of several conversations. At one end of the table, the old chamberlain was heard assuring an old baroness that he loved her passionately, at which she laughed; at the other could be heard the story of the misfortunes of some Mary Víktorovna or other. At the center of the table, Prince Vasíli attracted everybody's attention. With a facetious smile on his face, he was telling the ladies about last Wednesday's meeting of the Imperial Council, at which Sergéy Kuzmích Vyazmítinov, the new military governor general of Petersburg, had received and read the then famous rescript of the Emperor Alexander from the army to Sergéy Kuzmích, in which the Emperor said that he was receiving from all sides declarations of the people's loyalty, that the declaration from Petersburg gave him particular pleasure, and that he was proud to be at the head of such a nation and would endeavor to be worthy of it. This rescript began with the words: "Sergéy Kuzmích, From all sides reports reach me," etc.

“Well, and so he never got farther than: ‘Sergéy Kuzmích?’” asked one of the ladies.

“Exactly, not a hair’s breadth farther,” answered Prince Vasíli, laughing, “‘Sergéy Kuzmích... From all sides... From all sides... Sergéy Kuzmích...’ Poor Vyazmítinov could not get any farther! He began the rescript again and again, but as soon as he uttered ‘Sergéy’ he sobbed, ‘Kuz-mí-ch,’ tears, and ‘From all sides’ was smothered in sobs and he could get no farther. And again his handkerchief, and again: ‘Sergéy Kuzmích, From all sides,’ ... and tears, till at last somebody else was asked to read it.”

“Kuzmích... From all sides... and then tears,” someone repeated laughing.

“Don’t be unkind,” cried Anna Pávlovna from her end of the table holding up a threatening finger. “He is such a worthy and excellent man, our dear Vyazmítinov....”

Everybody laughed a great deal. At the head of the table, where the honored guests sat, everyone seemed to be in high spirits and under the influence of a variety of exciting sensations. Only Pierre and Héléne sat silently side by side almost at the bottom of the table, a suppressed smile brightening both their faces, a smile that had nothing to do with Sergéy Kuzmích—a smile of bashfulness at their own feelings. But much as all the rest laughed, talked, and joked, much as they enjoyed their Rhine wine, sauté, and ices, and however they avoided looking at the young couple, and heedless and unobservant as they seemed of them, one could feel by the occasional glances they gave that the story about Sergéy Kuzmích, the laughter, and the food were all a pretense, and that the whole attention of that company was directed to—Pierre and Héléne. Prince Vasíli mimicked the sobbing of Sergéy Kuzmích and at the same time his eyes glanced toward his daughter, and while he laughed the expression on his face clearly said: “Yes... it’s getting on, it will all be settled today.” Anna Pávlovna threatened him on behalf of “our dear Vyazmítinov,” and in her eyes, which, for an instant, glanced at Pierre, Prince Vasíli read a congratulation on his future son-in-law and on his daughter’s happiness. The old princess sighed sadly as she offered some wine to the old lady next to her and glanced angrily at her daughter, and her sigh seemed to say: “Yes, there’s nothing left for you and me but to sip sweet wine, my dear, now that the time has come for these young ones to be thus boldly, provocatively happy.” “And what nonsense all this is that I am saying!” thought a diplomatist, glancing at the happy faces of the lovers. “That’s happiness!”

Into the insignificant, trifling, and artificial interests uniting that society had entered the simple feeling of the attraction of a healthy and handsome young man and woman for one another. And this human feeling dominated everything else and soared above all their affected chatter. Jests fell flat, news was not interesting, and the animation was evidently forced. Not only the guests but even the footmen waiting at table seemed to feel this, and they forgot their duties as they looked at the beautiful Héléne with her radiant face and at the red, broad,

and happy though uneasy face of Pierre. It seemed as if the very light of the candles was focused on those two happy faces alone.

Pierre felt that he was the center of it all, and this both pleased and embarrassed him. He was like a man entirely absorbed in some occupation. He did not see, hear, or understand anything clearly. Only now and then detached ideas and impressions from the world of reality shot unexpectedly through his mind.

“So it is all finished!” he thought. “And how has it all happened? How quickly! Now I know that not because of her alone, nor of myself alone, but because of everyone, it must inevitably come about. They are all expecting it, they are so sure that it will happen that I cannot, I cannot, disappoint them. But how will it be? I do not know, but it will certainly happen!” thought Pierre, glancing at those dazzling shoulders close to his eyes.

Or he would suddenly feel ashamed of he knew not what. He felt it awkward to attract everyone’s attention and to be considered a lucky man and, with his plain face, to be looked on as a sort of Paris possessed of a Helen. “But no doubt it always is and must be so!” he consoled himself. “And besides, what have I done to bring it about? How did it begin? I traveled from Moscow with Prince Vasíli. Then there was nothing. So why should I not stay at his house? Then I played cards with her and picked up her reticule and drove out with her. How did it begin, when did it all come about?” And here he was sitting by her side as her betrothed, seeing, hearing, feeling her nearness, her breathing, her movements, her beauty. Then it would suddenly seem to him that it was not she but he was so unusually beautiful, and that that was why they all looked so at him, and flattered by this general admiration he would expand his chest, raise his head, and rejoice at his good fortune. Suddenly he heard a familiar voice repeating something to him a second time. But Pierre was so absorbed that he did not understand what was said.

“I am asking you when you last heard from Bolkónski,” repeated Prince Vasíli a third time. “How absent-minded you are, my dear fellow.”

Prince Vasíli smiled, and Pierre noticed that everyone was smiling at him and Héléne. “Well, what of it, if you all know it?” thought Pierre. “What of it? It’s the truth!” and he himself smiled his gentle childlike smile, and Héléne smiled too.

“When did you get the letter? Was it from Olmütz?” repeated Prince Vasíli, who pretended to want to know this in order to settle a dispute.

“How can one talk or think of such trifles?” thought Pierre.

“Yes, from Olmütz,” he answered, with a sigh.

After supper Pierre with his partner followed the others into the drawing room. The guests began to disperse, some without taking leave

of H  l  ne. Some, as if unwilling to distract her from an important occupation, came up to her for a moment and made haste to go away, refusing to let her see them off. The diplomatist preserved a mournful silence as he left the drawing room. He pictured the vanity of his diplomatic career in comparison with Pierre's happiness. The old general grumbled at his wife when she asked how his leg was. "Oh, the old fool," he thought. "That Princess H  l  ne will be beautiful still when she's fifty."

"I think I may congratulate you," whispered Anna P  vlovna to the old princess, kissing her soundly. "If I hadn't this headache I'd have stayed longer."

The old princess did not reply, she was tormented by jealousy of her daughter's happiness.

While the guests were taking their leave Pierre remained for a long time alone with H  l  ne in the little drawing room where they were sitting. He had often before, during the last six weeks, remained alone with her, but had never spoken to her of love. Now he felt that it was inevitable, but he could not make up his mind to take the final step. He felt ashamed; he felt that he was occupying someone else's place here beside H  l  ne. "This happiness is not for you," some inner voice whispered to him. "This happiness is for those who have not in them what there is in you."

But, as he had to say something, he began by asking her whether she was satisfied with the party. She replied in her usual simple manner that this name day of hers had been one of the pleasantest she had ever had.

Some of the nearest relatives had not yet left. They were sitting in the large drawing room. Prince Vas  li came up to Pierre with languid footsteps. Pierre rose and said it was getting late. Prince Vas  li gave him a look of stern inquiry, as though what Pierre had just said was so strange that one could not take it in. But then the expression of severity changed, and he drew Pierre's hand downwards, made him sit down, and smiled affectionately.

"Well, L  lya?" he asked, turning instantly to his daughter and addressing her with the careless tone of habitual tenderness natural to parents who have petted their children from babyhood, but which Prince Vas  li had only acquired by imitating other parents.

And he again turned to Pierre.

"Serg  y Kuzm  ch—From all sides—" he said, unbuttoning the top button of his waistcoat.

Pierre smiled, but his smile showed that he knew it was not the story about Serg  y Kuzm  ch that interested Prince Vas  li just then, and Prince Vas  li saw that Pierre knew this. He suddenly muttered something and went away. It seemed to Pierre that even the prince was disconcerted. The sight of the discomposure of that old man of the world touched Pierre: he looked at H  l  ne and she too seemed disconcerted,

and her look seemed to say: “Well, it is your own fault.”

“The step must be taken but I cannot, I cannot!” thought Pierre, and he again began speaking about indifferent matters, about Sergéy Kuzmích, asking what the point of the story was as he had not heard it properly. Hélène answered with a smile that she too had missed it.

When Prince Vasíli returned to the drawing room, the princess, his wife, was talking in low tones to the elderly lady about Pierre.

“Of course, it is a very brilliant match, but happiness, my dear...”

“Marriages are made in heaven,” replied the elderly lady.

Prince Vasíli passed by, seeming not to hear the ladies, and sat down on a sofa in a far corner of the room. He closed his eyes and seemed to be dozing. His head sank forward and then he roused himself.

“Aline,” he said to his wife, “go and see what they are about.”

The princess went up to the door, passed by it with a dignified and indifferent air, and glanced into the little drawing room. Pierre and Hélène still sat talking just as before.

“Still the same,” she said to her husband.

Prince Vasíli frowned, twisting his mouth, his cheeks quivered and his face assumed the coarse, unpleasant expression peculiar to him. Shaking himself, he rose, threw back his head, and with resolute steps went past the ladies into the little drawing room. With quick steps he went joyfully up to Pierre. His face was so unusually triumphant that Pierre rose in alarm on seeing it.

“Thank God!” said Prince Vasíli. “My wife has told me everything!” (He put one arm around Pierre and the other around his daughter.)—“My dear boy... Lělya... I am very pleased.” (His voice trembled.) “I loved your father... and she will make you a good wife... God bless you!...”

He embraced his daughter, and then again Pierre, and kissed him with his malodorous mouth. Tears actually moistened his cheeks.

“Princess, come here!” he shouted.

The old princess came in and also wept. The elderly lady was using her handkerchief too. Pierre was kissed, and he kissed the beautiful Hélène’s hand several times. After a while they were left alone again.

“All this had to be and could not be otherwise,” thought Pierre, “so it is useless to ask whether it is good or bad. It is good because it’s definite and one is rid of the old tormenting doubt.” Pierre held the hand of his betrothed in silence, looking at her beautiful bosom as it rose and fell.

“Hélène!” he said aloud and paused.

“Something special is always said in such cases,” he thought, but could not remember what it was that people say. He looked at her face. She drew nearer to him. Her face flushed.

“Oh, take those off... those...” she said, pointing to his spectacles.

Pierre took them off, and his eyes, besides the strange look eyes have from which spectacles have just been removed, had also a frightened and inquiring look. He was about to stoop over her hand and kiss it, but with a rapid, almost brutal movement of her head, she intercepted his lips and met them with her own. Her face struck Pierre, by its altered, unpleasantly excited expression.

“It is too late now, it’s done; besides I love her,” thought Pierre.

“Je vous aime!” * he said, remembering what has to be said at such moments: but his words sounded so weak that he felt ashamed of himself.

* “I love you.”

Six weeks later he was married, and settled in Count Bezúkhov’s large, newly furnished Petersburg house, the happy possessor, as people said, of a wife who was a celebrated beauty and of millions of money.