

CHAPTER III

Old Prince Nicholas Bolkónski received a letter from Prince Vasíli in November, 1805, announcing that he and his son would be paying him a visit. "I am starting on a journey of inspection, and of course I shall think nothing of an extra seventy miles to come and see you at the same time, my honored benefactor," wrote Prince Vasíli. "My son Anatole is accompanying me on his way to the army, so I hope you will allow him personally to express the deep respect that, emulating his father, he feels for you."

"It seems that there will be no need to bring Mary out, suitors are coming to us of their own accord," incautiously remarked the little princess on hearing the news.

Prince Nicholas frowned, but said nothing.

A fortnight after the letter Prince Vasíli's servants came one evening in advance of him, and he and his son arrived next day.

Old Bolkónski had always had a poor opinion of Prince Vasíli's character, but more so recently, since in the new reigns of Paul and Alexander Prince Vasíli had risen to high position and honors. And now, from the hints contained in his letter and given by the little princess, he saw which way the wind was blowing, and his low opinion changed into a feeling of contemptuous ill will. He snorted whenever he mentioned him. On the day of Prince Vasíli's arrival, Prince Bolkónski was particularly discontented and out of temper. Whether he was in a bad temper because Prince Vasíli was coming, or whether his being in a bad temper made him specially annoyed at Prince Vasíli's visit, he was in a bad temper, and in the morning Tíkhon had already advised the architect not to go to the prince with his report.

"Do you hear how he's walking?" said Tíkhon, drawing the architect's attention to the sound of the prince's footsteps. "Stepping flat on his heels—we know what that means...."

However, at nine o'clock the prince, in his velvet coat with a sable collar and cap, went out for his usual walk. It had snowed the day before and the path to the hothouse, along which the prince was in the habit of walking, had been swept: the marks of the broom were still visible in the snow and a shovel had been left sticking in one of the soft snowbanks that bordered both sides of the path. The prince went through the conservatories, the serfs' quarters, and the outbuildings, frowning and silent.

"Can a sleigh pass?" he asked his overseer, a venerable man, resembling his master in manners and looks, who was accompanying him back to the house.

"The snow is deep. I am having the avenue swept, your honor."

The prince bowed his head and went up to the porch. "God be

thanked,” thought the overseer, “the storm has blown over!”

“It would have been hard to drive up, your honor,” he added. “I heard, your honor, that a minister is coming to visit your honor.”

The prince turned round to the overseer and fixed his eyes on him, frowning.

“What? A minister? What minister? Who gave orders?” he said in his shrill, harsh voice. “The road is not swept for the princess my daughter, but for a minister! For me, there are no ministers!”

“Your honor, I thought...”

“You thought!” shouted the prince, his words coming more and more rapidly and indistinctly. “You thought!... Rascals! Blackguards!... I’ll teach you to think!” and lifting his stick he swung it and would have hit Alpátych, the overseer, had not the latter instinctively avoided the blow. “Thought... Blackguards...” shouted the prince rapidly.

But although Alpátych, frightened at his own temerity in avoiding the stroke, came up to the prince, bowing his bald head resignedly before him, or perhaps for that very reason, the prince, though he continued to shout: “Blackguards!... Throw the snow back on the road!” did not lift his stick again but hurried into the house.

Before dinner, Princess Mary and Mademoiselle Bourienne, who knew that the prince was in a bad humor, stood awaiting him; Mademoiselle Bourienne with a radiant face that said: “I know nothing, I am the same as usual,” and Princess Mary pale, frightened, and with downcast eyes. What she found hardest to bear was to know that on such occasions she ought to behave like Mademoiselle Bourienne, but could not. She thought: “If I seem not to notice he will think that I do not sympathize with him; if I seem sad and out of spirits myself, he will say (as he has done before) that I’m in the dumps.”

The prince looked at his daughter’s frightened face and snorted.

“Fool... or dummy!” he muttered.

“And the other one is not here. They’ve been telling tales,” he thought—referring to the little princess who was not in the dining room.

“Where is the princess?” he asked. “Hiding?”

“She is not very well,” answered Mademoiselle Bourienne with a bright smile, “so she won’t come down. It is natural in her state.”

“Hm! Hm!” muttered the prince, sitting down.

His plate seemed to him not quite clean, and pointing to a spot he

flung it away. Tikhon caught it and handed it to a footman. The little princess was not unwell, but had such an overpowering fear of the prince that, hearing he was in a bad humor, she had decided not to appear.

“I am afraid for the baby,” she said to Mademoiselle Bourienne: “Heaven knows what a fright might do.”

In general at Bald Hills the little princess lived in constant fear, and with a sense of antipathy to the old prince which she did not realize because the fear was so much the stronger feeling. The prince reciprocated this antipathy, but it was overpowered by his contempt for her. When the little princess had grown accustomed to life at Bald Hills, she took a special fancy to Mademoiselle Bourienne, spent whole days with her, asked her to sleep in her room, and often talked with her about the old prince and criticized him.

“So we are to have visitors, mon prince?” remarked Mademoiselle Bourienne, unfolding her white napkin with her rosy fingers. “His Excellency Prince Vasíli Kurágin and his son, I understand?” she said inquiringly.

“Hm!—his excellency is a puppy.... I got him his appointment in the service,” said the prince disdainfully. “Why his son is coming I don’t understand. Perhaps Princess Elizabeth and Princess Mary know. I don’t want him.” (He looked at his blushing daughter.) “Are you unwell today? Eh? Afraid of the ‘minister’ as that idiot Alpátych called him this morning?”

“No, mon père.”

Though Mademoiselle Bourienne had been so unsuccessful in her choice of a subject, she did not stop talking, but chattered about the conservatories and the beauty of a flower that had just opened, and after the soup the prince became more genial.

After dinner, he went to see his daughter-in-law. The little princess was sitting at a small table, chattering with Másha, her maid. She grew pale on seeing her father-in-law.

She was much altered. She was now plain rather than pretty. Her cheeks had sunk, her lip was drawn up, and her eyes drawn down.

“Yes, I feel a kind of oppression,” she said in reply to the prince’s question as to how she felt.

“Do you want anything?”

“No, merci, mon père.”

“Well, all right, all right.”

He left the room and went to the waiting room where Alpátych stood with bowed head.

“Has the snow been shoveled back?”

“Yes, your excellency. Forgive me for heaven’s sake... It was only my stupidity.”

“All right, all right,” interrupted the prince, and laughing his unnatural way, he stretched out his hand for Alpátych to kiss, and then proceeded to his study.

Prince Vasíli arrived that evening. He was met in the avenue by coachmen and footmen, who, with loud shouts, dragged his sleighs up to one of the lodges over the road purposely laden with snow.

Prince Vasíli and Anatole had separate rooms assigned to them.

Anatole, having taken off his overcoat, sat with arms akimbo before a table on a corner of which he smilingly and absent-mindedly fixed his large and handsome eyes. He regarded his whole life as a continual round of amusement which someone for some reason had to provide for him. And he looked on this visit to a churlish old man and a rich and ugly heiress in the same way. All this might, he thought, turn out very well and amusingly. “And why not marry her if she really has so much money? That never does any harm,” thought Anatole.

He shaved and scented himself with the care and elegance which had become habitual to him and, his handsome head held high, entered his father’s room with the good-humored and victorious air natural to him. Prince Vasíli’s two valets were busy dressing him, and he looked round with much animation and cheerfully nodded to his son as the latter entered, as if to say: “Yes, that’s how I want you to look.”

“I say, Father, joking apart, is she very hideous?” Anatole asked, as if continuing a conversation the subject of which had often been mentioned during the journey.

“Enough! What nonsense! Above all, try to be respectful and cautious with the old prince.”

“If he starts a row I’ll go away,” said Prince Anatole. “I can’t bear those old men! Eh?”

“Remember, for you everything depends on this.”

In the meantime, not only was it known in the maidservants’ rooms that the minister and his son had arrived, but the appearance of both had been minutely described. Princess Mary was sitting alone in her room, vainly trying to master her agitation.

“Why did they write, why did Lise tell me about it? It can never happen!” she said, looking at herself in the glass. “How shall I enter the drawing room? Even if I like him I can’t now be myself with him.” The mere thought of her father’s look filled her with terror. The little princess and Mademoiselle Bourienne had already received from Másha, the lady’s maid, the necessary report of how handsome the

minister's son was, with his rosy cheeks and dark eyebrows, and with what difficulty the father had dragged his legs upstairs while the son had followed him like an eagle, three steps at a time. Having received this information, the little princess and Mademoiselle Bourienne, whose chattering voices had reached her from the corridor, went into Princess Mary's room.

"You know they've come, Marie?" said the little princess, waddling in, and sinking heavily into an armchair.

She was no longer in the loose gown she generally wore in the morning, but had on one of her best dresses. Her hair was carefully done and her face was animated, which, however, did not conceal its sunken and faded outlines. Dressed as she used to be in Petersburg society, it was still more noticeable how much plainer she had become. Some unobtrusive touch had been added to Mademoiselle Bourienne's toilet which rendered her fresh and pretty face yet more attractive.

"What! Are you going to remain as you are, dear princess?" she began. "They'll be announcing that the gentlemen are in the drawing room and we shall have to go down, and you have not smartened yourself up at all!"

The little princess got up, rang for the maid, and hurriedly and merrily began to devise and carry out a plan of how Princess Mary should be dressed. Princess Mary's self-esteem was wounded by the fact that the arrival of a suitor agitated her, and still more so by both her companions' not having the least conception that it could be otherwise. To tell them that she felt ashamed for herself and for them would be to betray her agitation, while to decline their offers to dress her would prolong their banter and insistence. She flushed, her beautiful eyes grew dim, red blotches came on her face, and it took on the unattractive martyrlike expression it so often wore, as she submitted herself to Mademoiselle Bourienne and Lise. Both these women quite sincerely tried to make her look pretty. She was so plain that neither of them could think of her as a rival, so they began dressing her with perfect sincerity, and with the naïve and firm conviction women have that dress can make a face pretty.

"No really, my dear, this dress is not pretty," said Lise, looking sideways at Princess Mary from a little distance. "You have a maroon dress, have it fetched. Really! You know the fate of your whole life may be at stake. But this one is too light, it's not becoming!"

It was not the dress, but the face and whole figure of Princess Mary that was not pretty, but neither Mademoiselle Bourienne nor the little princess felt this; they still thought that if a blue ribbon were placed in the hair, the hair combed up, and the blue scarf arranged lower on the best maroon dress, and so on, all would be well. They forgot that the frightened face and the figure could not be altered, and that however they might change the setting and adornment of that face, it would still remain piteous and plain. After two or three changes to which Princess Mary meekly submitted, just as her hair had been arranged on the top of her head (a style that quite altered and spoiled her

looks) and she had put on a maroon dress with a pale-blue scarf, the little princess walked twice round her, now adjusting a fold of the dress with her little hand, now arranging the scarf and looking at her with her head bent first on one side and then on the other.

“No, it will not do,” she said decidedly, clasping her hands. “No, Mary, really this dress does not suit you. I prefer you in your little gray everyday dress. Now please, do it for my sake. Katie,” she said to the maid, “bring the princess her gray dress, and you’ll see, Mademoiselle Bourienne, how I shall arrange it,” she added, smiling with a foretaste of artistic pleasure.

But when Katie brought the required dress, Princess Mary remained sitting motionless before the glass, looking at her face, and saw in the mirror her eyes full of tears and her mouth quivering, ready to burst into sobs.

“Come, dear princess,” said Mademoiselle Bourienne, “just one more little effort.”

The little princess, taking the dress from the maid, came up to Princess Mary.

“Well, now we’ll arrange something quite simple and becoming,” she said.

The three voices, hers, Mademoiselle Bourienne’s, and Katie’s, who was laughing at something, mingled in a merry sound, like the chirping of birds.

“No, leave me alone,” said Princess Mary.

Her voice sounded so serious and so sad that the chirping of the birds was silenced at once. They looked at the beautiful, large, thoughtful eyes full of tears and of thoughts, gazing shingly and imploringly at them, and understood that it was useless and even cruel to insist.

“At least, change your coiffure,” said the little princess. “Didn’t I tell you,” she went on, turning reproachfully to Mademoiselle Bourienne, “Mary’s is a face which such a coiffure does not suit in the least. Not in the least! Please change it.”

“Leave me alone, please leave me alone! It is all quite the same to me,” answered a voice struggling with tears.

Mademoiselle Bourienne and the little princess had to own to themselves that Princess Mary in this guise looked very plain, worse than usual, but it was too late. She was looking at them with an expression they both knew, an expression thoughtful and sad. This expression in Princess Mary did not frighten them (she never inspired fear in anyone), but they knew that when it appeared on her face, she became mute and was not to be shaken in her determination.

“You will change it, won’t you?” said Lise. And as Princess Mary

gave no answer, she left the room.

Princess Mary was left alone. She did not comply with Lise's request, she not only left her hair as it was, but did not even look in her glass. Letting her arms fall helplessly, she sat with downcast eyes and pondered. A husband, a man, a strong dominant and strangely attractive being rose in her imagination, and carried her into a totally different happy world of his own. She fancied a child, her own—such as she had seen the day before in the arms of her nurse's daughter—at her own breast, the husband standing by and gazing tenderly at her and the child. "But no, it is impossible, I am too ugly," she thought.

"Please come to tea. The prince will be out in a moment," came the maid's voice at the door.

She roused herself, and felt appalled at what she had been thinking, and before going down she went into the room where the icons hung and, her eyes fixed on the dark face of a large icon of the Saviour lit by a lamp, she stood before it with folded hands for a few moments. A painful doubt filled her soul. Could the joy of love, of earthly love for a man, be for her? In her thoughts of marriage Princess Mary dreamed of happiness and of children, but her strongest, most deeply hidden longing was for earthly love. The more she tried to hide this feeling from others and even from herself, the stronger it grew. "O God," she said, "how am I to stifle in my heart these temptations of the devil? How am I to renounce forever these vile fancies, so as peacefully to fulfill Thy will?" And scarcely had she put that question than God gave her the answer in her own heart. "Desire nothing for thyself, seek nothing, be not anxious or envious. Man's future and thy own fate must remain hidden from thee, but live so that thou mayest be ready for anything. If it be God's will to prove thee in the duties of marriage, be ready to fulfill His will." With this consoling thought (but yet with a hope for the fulfillment of her forbidden earthly longing) Princess Mary sighed, and having crossed herself went down, thinking neither of her gown and coiffure nor of how she would go in nor of what she would say. What could all that matter in comparison with the will of God, without Whose care not a hair of man's head can fall?