

CHAPTER VII

When Borís and Anna Pávlovna returned to the others Prince Hippolyte had the ear of the company.

Bending forward in his armchair he said: “Le Roi de Prusse!” and having said this laughed. Everyone turned toward him.

“Le Roi de Prusse?” Hippolyte said interrogatively, again laughing, and then calmly and seriously sat back in his chair. Anna Pávlovna waited for him to go on, but as he seemed quite decided to say no more she began to tell of how at Potsdam the impious Bonaparte had stolen the sword of Frederick the Great.

“It is the sword of Frederick the Great which I...” she began, but Hippolyte interrupted her with the words: “Le Roi de Prusse...” and again, as soon as all turned toward him, excused himself and said no more.

Anna Pávlovna frowned. Mortemart, Hippolyte’s friend, addressed him firmly.

“Come now, what about your Roi de Prusse?”

Hippolyte laughed as if ashamed of laughing.

“Oh, it’s nothing. I only wished to say...” (he wanted to repeat a joke he had heard in Vienna and which he had been trying all that evening to get in) “I only wished to say that we are wrong to fight pour le Roi de Prusse!”

Borís smiled circumspectly, so that it might be taken as ironical or appreciative according to the way the joke was received. Everybody laughed.

“Your joke is too bad, it’s witty but unjust,” said Anna Pávlovna, shaking her little shriveled finger at him.

“We are not fighting pour le Roi de Prusse, but for right principles. Oh, that wicked Prince Hippolyte!” she said.

The conversation did not flag all evening and turned chiefly on the political news. It became particularly animated toward the end of the evening when the rewards bestowed by the Emperor were mentioned.

“You know N— N— received a snuffbox with the portrait last year?” said “the man of profound intellect.” “Why shouldn’t S— S— get the same distinction?”

“Pardon me! A snuffbox with the Emperor’s portrait is a reward but not a distinction,” said the diplomatist—“a gift, rather.”

“There are precedents, I may mention Schwarzenberg.”

“It’s impossible,” replied another.

“Will you bet? The ribbon of the order is a different matter....”

When everybody rose to go, H  l  ne who had spoken very little all the evening again turned to Bor  s, asking him in a tone of caressing significant command to come to her on Tuesday.

“It is of great importance to me,” she said, turning with a smile toward Anna P  vlovna, and Anna P  vlovna, with the same sad smile with which she spoke of her exalted patroness, supported H  l  ne’s wish.

It seemed as if from some words Bor  s had spoken that evening about the Prussian army, H  l  ne had suddenly found it necessary to see him. She seemed to promise to explain that necessity to him when he came on Tuesday.

But on Tuesday evening, having come to H  l  ne’s splendid salon, Bor  s received no clear explanation of why it had been necessary for him to come. There were other guests and the countess talked little to him, and only as he kissed her hand on taking leave said unexpectedly and in a whisper, with a strangely unsmiling face: “Come to dinner tomorrow... in the evening. You must come.... Come!”

During that stay in Petersburg, Bor  s became an intimate in the countess’ house.