

CHAPTER IV

Prince Andrew arrived in Petersburg in August, 1809. It was the time when the youthful Speránski was at the zenith of his fame and his reforms were being pushed forward with the greatest energy. That same August the Emperor was thrown from his calèche, injured his leg, and remained three weeks at Peterhof, receiving Speránski every day and no one else. At that time the two famous decrees were being prepared that so agitated society—abolishing court ranks and introducing examinations to qualify for the grades of Collegiate Assessor and State Councilor—and not merely these but a whole state constitution, intended to change the existing order of government in Russia: legal, administrative, and financial, from the Council of State down to the district tribunals. Now those vague liberal dreams with which the Emperor Alexander had ascended the throne, and which he had tried to put into effect with the aid of his associates, Czartorýski, Novosíltsev, Kochubéy, and Strógonov—whom he himself in jest had called his Comité de salut public—were taking shape and being realized.

Now all these men were replaced by Speránski on the civil side, and Arakchéev on the military. Soon after his arrival Prince Andrew, as a gentleman of the chamber, presented himself at court and at a levee. The Emperor, though he met him twice, did not favor him with a single word. It had always seemed to Prince Andrew before that he was antipathetic to the Emperor and that the latter disliked his face and personality generally, and in the cold, repellent glance the Emperor gave him, he now found further confirmation of this surmise. The courtiers explained the Emperor's neglect of him by His Majesty's displeasure at Bolkónski's not having served since 1805.

"I know myself that one cannot help one's sympathies and antipathies," thought Prince Andrew, "so it will not do to present my proposal for the reform of the army regulations to the Emperor personally, but the project will speak for itself."

He mentioned what he had written to an old field marshal, a friend of his father's. The field marshal made an appointment to see him, received him graciously, and promised to inform the Emperor. A few days later Prince Andrew received notice that he was to go to see the Minister of War, Count Arakchéev.

On the appointed day Prince Andrew entered Count Arakchéev's waiting room at nine in the morning.

He did not know Arakchéev personally, had never seen him, and all he had heard of him inspired him with but little respect for the man.

"He is Minister of War, a man trusted by the Emperor, and I need not concern myself about his personal qualities: he has been commissioned to consider my project, so he alone can get it adopted," thought Prince Andrew as he waited among a number of important and unimportant people in Count Arakchéev's waiting room.

During his service, chiefly as an adjutant, Prince Andrew had seen the anterooms of many important men, and the different types of such rooms were well known to him. Count Arakchéev's anteroom had quite a special character. The faces of the unimportant people awaiting their turn for an audience showed embarrassment and servility; the faces of those of higher rank expressed a common feeling of awkwardness, covered by a mask of unconcern and ridicule of themselves, their situation, and the person for whom they were waiting. Some walked thoughtfully up and down, others whispered and laughed. Prince Andrew heard the nickname "Síla Andréevich" and the words, "Uncle will give it to us hot," in reference to Count Arakchéev. One general (an important personage), evidently feeling offended at having to wait so long, sat crossing and uncrossing his legs and smiling contemptuously to himself.

But the moment the door opened one feeling alone appeared on all faces—that of fear. Prince Andrew for the second time asked the adjutant on duty to take in his name, but received an ironical look and was told that his turn would come in due course. After some others had been shown in and out of the minister's room by the adjutant on duty, an officer who struck Prince Andrew by his humiliated and frightened air was admitted at that terrible door. This officer's audience lasted a long time. Then suddenly the grating sound of a harsh voice was heard from the other side of the door, and the officer—with pale face and trembling lips—came out and passed through the waiting room, clutching his head.

After this Prince Andrew was conducted to the door and the officer on duty said in a whisper, "To the right, at the window."

Prince Andrew entered a plain tidy room and saw at the table a man of forty with a long waist, a long closely cropped head, deep wrinkles, scowling brows above dull greenish-hazel eyes and an overhanging red nose. Arakchéev turned his head toward him without looking at him.

"What is your petition?" asked Arakchéev.

"I am not petitioning, your excellency," returned Prince Andrew quietly.

Arakchéev's eyes turned toward him.

"Sit down," said he. "Prince Bolkónski?"

"I am not petitioning about anything. His Majesty the Emperor has deigned to send your excellency a project submitted by me..."

"You see, my dear sir, I have read your project," interrupted Arakchéev, uttering only the first words amiably and then—again without looking at Prince Andrew—relapsing gradually into a tone of grumbling contempt. "You are proposing new military laws? There are many laws but no one to carry out the old ones. Nowadays everybody designs laws, it is easier writing than doing."

“I came at His Majesty the Emperor’s wish to learn from your excellency how you propose to deal with the memorandum I have presented,” said Prince Andrew politely.

“I have endorsed a resolution on your memorandum and sent it to the committee. I do not approve of it,” said Arakchéev, rising and taking a paper from his writing table. “Here!” and he handed it to Prince Andrew.

Across the paper was scrawled in pencil, without capital letters, misspelled, and without punctuation: “Unsoundly constructed because resembles an imitation of the French military code and from the Articles of War needlessly deviating.”

“To what committee has the memorandum been referred?” inquired Prince Andrew.

“To the Committee on Army Regulations, and I have recommended that your honor should be appointed a member, but without a salary.”

Prince Andrew smiled.

“I don’t want one.”

“A member without salary,” repeated Arakchéev. “I have the honor... Eh! Call the next one! Who else is there?” he shouted, bowing to Prince Andrew.