

CHAPTER V

While waiting for the announcement of his appointment to the committee Prince Andrew looked up his former acquaintances, particularly those he knew to be in power and whose aid he might need. In Petersburg he now experienced the same feeling he had had on the eve of a battle, when troubled by anxious curiosity and irresistibly attracted to the ruling circles where the future, on which the fate of millions depended, was being shaped. From the irritation of the older men, the curiosity of the uninitiated, the reserve of the initiated, the hurry and preoccupation of everyone, and the innumerable committees and commissions of whose existence he learned every day, he felt that now, in 1809, here in Petersburg a vast civil conflict was in preparation, the commander in chief of which was a mysterious person he did not know, but who was supposed to be a man of genius—Speránski. And this movement of reconstruction of which Prince Andrew had a vague idea, and Speránski its chief promoter, began to interest him so keenly that the question of the army regulations quickly receded to a secondary place in his consciousness.

Prince Andrew was most favorably placed to secure good reception in the highest and most diverse Petersburg circles of the day. The reforming party cordially welcomed and courted him, in the first place because he was reputed to be clever and very well read, and secondly because by liberating his serfs he had obtained the reputation of being a liberal. The party of the old and dissatisfied, who censured the innovations, turned to him expecting his sympathy in their disapproval of the reforms, simply because he was the son of his father. The feminine society world welcomed him gladly, because he was rich, distinguished, a good match, and almost a newcomer, with a halo of romance on account of his supposed death and the tragic loss of his wife. Besides this the general opinion of all who had known him previously was that he had greatly improved during these last five years, having softened and grown more manly, lost his former affectation, pride, and contemptuous irony, and acquired the serenity that comes with years. People talked about him, were interested in him, and wanted to meet him.

The day after his interview with Count Arakchéev, Prince Andrew spent the evening at Count Kochubéy's. He told the count of his interview with Síla Andréevich (Kochubéy spoke of Arakchéev by that nickname with the same vague irony Prince Andrew had noticed in the Minister of War's anteroom).

“Mon cher, even in this case you can't do without Michael Mikháylovich Speránski. He manages everything. I'll speak to him. He has promised to come this evening.”

“What has Speránski to do with the army regulations?” asked Prince Andrew.

Kochubéy shook his head smilingly, as if surprised at Bolkónski's simplicity.

“We were talking to him about you a few days ago,” Kochubéy continued, “and about your freed plowmen.”

“Oh, is it you, Prince, who have freed your serfs?” said an old man of Catherine’s day, turning contemptuously toward Bolkónski.

“It was a small estate that brought in no profit,” replied Prince Andrew, trying to extenuate his action so as not to irritate the old man uselessly.

“Afraid of being late...” said the old man, looking at Kochubéy.

“There’s one thing I don’t understand,” he continued. “Who will plow the land if they are set free? It is easy to write laws, but difficult to rule.... Just the same as now—I ask you, Count—who will be heads of the departments when everybody has to pass examinations?”

“Those who pass the examinations, I suppose,” replied Kochubéy, crossing his legs and glancing round.

“Well, I have Pryánichnikov serving under me, a splendid man, a priceless man, but he’s sixty. Is he to go up for examination?”

“Yes, that’s a difficulty, as education is not at all general, but...”

Count Kochubéy did not finish. He rose, took Prince Andrew by the arm, and went to meet a tall, bald, fair man of about forty with a large open forehead and a long face of unusual and peculiar whiteness, who was just entering. The newcomer wore a blue swallow-tail coat with a cross suspended from his neck and a star on his left breast. It was Speránski. Prince Andrew recognized him at once, and felt a throb within him, as happens at critical moments of life. Whether it was from respect, envy, or anticipation, he did not know. Speránski’s whole figure was of a peculiar type that made him easily recognizable. In the society in which Prince Andrew lived he had never seen anyone who together with awkward and clumsy gestures possessed such calmness and self-assurance; he had never seen so resolute yet gentle an expression as that in those half-closed, rather humid eyes, or so firm a smile that expressed nothing; nor had he heard such a refined, smooth, soft voice; above all he had never seen such delicate whiteness of face or hands—hands which were broad, but very plump, soft, and white. Such whiteness and softness Prince Andrew had only seen on the faces of soldiers who had been long in hospital. This was Speránski, Secretary of State, reporter to the Emperor and his companion at Erfurt, where he had more than once met and talked with Napoleon.

Speránski did not shift his eyes from one face to another as people involuntarily do on entering a large company and was in no hurry to speak. He spoke slowly, with assurance that he would be listened to, and he looked only at the person with whom he was conversing.

Prince Andrew followed Speránski’s every word and movement with particular attention. As happens to some people, especially to men

who judge those near to them severely, he always on meeting anyone new—especially anyone whom, like Speránski, he knew by reputation—expected to discover in him the perfection of human qualities.

Speránski told Kochubéy he was sorry he had been unable to come sooner as he had been detained at the palace. He did not say that the Emperor had kept him, and Prince Andrew noticed this affectation of modesty. When Kochubéy introduced Prince Andrew, Speránski slowly turned his eyes to Bolkónski with his customary smile and looked at him in silence.

“I am very glad to make your acquaintance. I had heard of you, as everyone has,” he said after a pause.

Kochubéy said a few words about the reception Arakchéev had given Bolkónski. Speránski smiled more markedly.

“The chairman of the Committee on Army Regulations is my good friend Monsieur Magníski,” he said, fully articulating every word and syllable, “and if you like I can put you in touch with him.” He paused at the full stop. “I hope you will find him sympathetic and ready to co-operate in promoting all that is reasonable.”

A circle soon formed round Speránski, and the old man who had talked about his subordinate Pryá nichnikov addressed a question to him.

Prince Andrew without joining in the conversation watched every movement of Speránski’s: this man, not long since an insignificant divinity student, who now, Bolkónski thought, held in his hands—those plump white hands—the fate of Russia. Prince Andrew was struck by the extraordinarily disdainful composure with which Speránski answered the old man. He appeared to address condescending words to him from an immeasurable height. When the old man began to speak too loud, Speránski smiled and said he could not judge of the advantage or disadvantage of what pleased the sovereign.

Having talked for a little while in the general circle, Speránski rose and coming up to Prince Andrew took him along to the other end of the room. It was clear that he thought it necessary to interest himself in Bolkónski.

“I had no chance to talk with you, Prince, during the animated conversation in which that venerable gentleman involved me,” he said with a mildly contemptuous smile, as if intimating by that smile that he and Prince Andrew understood the insignificance of the people with whom he had just been talking. This flattered Prince Andrew. “I have known of you for a long time: first from your action with regard to your serfs, a first example, of which it is very desirable that there should be more imitators; and secondly because you are one of those gentlemen of the chamber who have not considered themselves offended by the new decree concerning the ranks allotted to courtiers, which is causing so much gossip and tittle-tattle.”

“No,” said Prince Andrew, “my father did not wish me to take advantage of the privilege. I began the service from the lower grade.”

“Your father, a man of the last century, evidently stands above our contemporaries who so condemn this measure which merely re-establishes natural justice.”

“I think, however, that these condemnations have some ground,” returned Prince Andrew, trying to resist Speránski’s influence, of which he began to be conscious. He did not like to agree with him in everything and felt a wish to contradict. Though he usually spoke easily and well, he felt a difficulty in expressing himself now while talking with Speránski. He was too much absorbed in observing the famous man’s personality.

“Grounds of personal ambition maybe,” Speránski put in quietly.

“And of state interest to some extent,” said Prince Andrew.

“What do you mean?” asked Speránski quietly, lowering his eyes.

“I am an admirer of Montesquieu,” replied Prince Andrew, “and his idea that *le principe des monarchies est l’honneur me paraît incontestable. Certains droits et privilèges de la noblesse me paraissent être des moyens de soutenir ce sentiment.*” *

* “The principle of monarchies is honor seems to me incontestable. Certain rights and privileges for the aristocracy appear to me a means of maintaining that sentiment.”

The smile vanished from Speránski’s white face, which was much improved by the change. Probably Prince Andrew’s thought interested him.

“Si vous envisagez la question sous ce point de vue,” * he began, pronouncing French with evident difficulty, and speaking even slower than in Russian but quite calmly.

* “If you regard the question from that point of view.”

Speránski went on to say that honor, *l’honneur*, cannot be upheld by privileges harmful to the service; that honor, *l’honneur*, is either a negative concept of not doing what is blameworthy or it is a source of emulation in pursuit of commendation and rewards, which recognize it. His arguments were concise, simple, and clear.

“An institution upholding honor, the source of emulation, is one similar to the *Légion d’honneur* of the great Emperor Napoleon, not harmful but helpful to the success of the service, but not a class or court privilege.”

“I do not dispute that, but it cannot be denied that court privileges have attained the same end,” returned Prince Andrew. “Every courtier considers himself bound to maintain his position worthily.”

“Yet you do not care to avail yourself of the privilege, Prince,” said Speránski, indicating by a smile that he wished to finish amiably an argument which was embarrassing for his companion. “If you will do me the honor of calling on me on Wednesday,” he added, “I will, after talking with Magníski, let you know what may interest you, and shall also have the pleasure of a more detailed chat with you.”

Closing his eyes, he bowed *à la française*, without taking leave, and trying to attract as little attention as possible, he left the room.