

CHAPTER IX

At that time, as always happens, the highest society that met at court and at the grand balls was divided into several circles, each with its own particular tone. The largest of these was the French circle of the Napoleonic alliance, the circle of Count Romyántsev and Caulaincourt. In this group H  l  ne, as soon as she had settled in Petersburg with her husband, took a very prominent place. She was visited by the members of the French embassy and by many belonging to that circle and noted for their intellect and polished manners.

H  l  ne had been at Erfurt during the famous meeting of the Emperors and had brought from there these connections with the Napoleonic notabilities. At Erfurt her success had been brilliant. Napoleon himself had noticed her in the theater and said of her: "C'est un superbe animal." * Her success as a beautiful and elegant woman did not surprise Pierre, for she had become even handsomer than before. What did surprise him was that during these last two years his wife had succeeded in gaining the reputation "d' une femme charmante, aussi spirituelle que belle." *(2) The distinguished Prince de Ligne wrote her eight-page letters. Bil  bin saved up his epigrams to produce them in Countess Bez  khova's presence. To be received in the Countess Bez  khova's salon was regarded as a diploma of intellect. Young men read books before attending H  l  ne's evenings, to have something to say in her salon, and secretaries of the embassy, and even ambassadors, confided diplomatic secrets to her, so that in a way H  l  ne was a power. Pierre, who knew she was very stupid, sometimes attended, with a strange feeling of perplexity and fear, her evenings and dinner parties, where politics, poetry, and philosophy were discussed. At these parties his feelings were like those of a conjuror who always expects his trick to be found out at any moment. But whether because stupidity was just what was needed to run such a salon, or because those who were deceived found pleasure in the deception, at any rate it remained unexposed and H  l  ne Bez  khova's reputation as a lovely and clever woman became so firmly established that she could say the emptiest and stupidest things and everybody would go into raptures over every word of hers and look for a profound meaning in it of which she herself had no conception.

* "That's a superb animal."

*(2) "Of a charming woman, as witty as she is lovely."

Pierre was just the husband needed for a brilliant society woman. He was that absent-minded crank, a grand seigneur husband who was in no one's way, and far from spoiling the high tone and general impression of the drawing room, he served, by the contrast he presented to her, as an advantageous background to his elegant and tactful wife. Pierre during the last two years, as a result of his continual absorption in abstract interests and his sincere contempt for all else, had acquired in his wife's circle, which did not interest him, that air of unconcern, indifference, and benevolence toward all, which cannot be acquired

artificially and therefore inspires involuntary respect. He entered his wife's drawing room as one enters a theater, was acquainted with everybody, equally pleased to see everyone, and equally indifferent to them all. Sometimes he joined in a conversation which interested him and, regardless of whether any "gentlemen of the embassy" were present or not, lispily expressed his views, which were sometimes not at all in accord with the accepted tone of the moment. But the general opinion concerning the queer husband of "the most distinguished woman in Petersburg" was so well established that no one took his freaks seriously.

Among the many young men who frequented her house every day, Borís Drubetskóy, who had already achieved great success in the service, was the most intimate friend of the Bezúkhov household since Héléne's return from Erfurt. Héléne spoke of him as "mon page" and treated him like a child. Her smile for him was the same as for everybody, but sometimes that smile made Pierre uncomfortable. Toward him Borís behaved with a particularly dignified and sad deference. This shade of deference also disturbed Pierre. He had suffered so painfully three years before from the mortification to which his wife had subjected him that he now protected himself from the danger of its repetition, first by not being a husband to his wife, and secondly by not allowing himself to suspect.

"No, now that she has become a bluestocking she has finally renounced her former infatuations," he told himself. "There has never been an instance of a bluestocking being carried away by affairs of the heart"—a statement which, though gathered from an unknown source, he believed implicitly. Yet strange to say Borís' presence in his wife's drawing room (and he was almost always there) had a physical effect upon Pierre; it constricted his limbs and destroyed the unconsciousness and freedom of his movements.

"What a strange antipathy," thought Pierre, "yet I used to like him very much."

In the eyes of the world Pierre was a great gentleman, the rather blind and absurd husband of a distinguished wife, a clever crank who did nothing but harmed nobody and was a first-rate, good-natured fellow. But a complex and difficult process of internal development was taking place all this time in Pierre's soul, revealing much to him and causing him many spiritual doubts and joys.