

CHAPTER XX

One morning Colonel Berg, whom Pierre knew as he knew everybody in Moscow and Petersburg, came to see him. Berg arrived in an immaculate brand-new uniform, with his hair pomaded and brushed forward over his temples as the Emperor Alexander wore his hair.

“I have just been to see the countess, your wife. Unfortunately she could not grant my request, but I hope, Count, I shall be more fortunate with you,” he said with a smile.

“What is it you wish, Colonel? I am at your service.”

“I have now quite settled in my new rooms, Count” (Berg said this with perfect conviction that this information could not but be agreeable), “and so I wish to arrange just a small party for my own and my wife’s friends.” (He smiled still more pleasantly.) “I wished to ask the countess and you to do me the honor of coming to tea and to supper.”

Only Countess Hélène, considering the society of such people as the Bergs beneath her, could be cruel enough to refuse such an invitation. Berg explained so clearly why he wanted to collect at his house a small but select company, and why this would give him pleasure, and why though he grudged spending money on cards or anything harmful, he was prepared to run into some expense for the sake of good society—that Pierre could not refuse, and promised to come.

“But don’t be late, Count, if I may venture to ask; about ten minutes to eight, please. We shall make up a rubber. Our general is coming. He is very good to me. We shall have supper, Count. So you will do me the favor.”

Contrary to his habit of being late, Pierre on that day arrived at the Bergs’ house, not at ten but at fifteen minutes to eight.

Having prepared everything necessary for the party, the Bergs were ready for their guests’ arrival.

In their new, clean, and light study with its small busts and pictures and new furniture sat Berg and his wife. Berg, closely buttoned up in his new uniform, sat beside his wife explaining to her that one always could and should be acquainted with people above one, because only then does one get satisfaction from acquaintances.

“You can get to know something, you can ask for something. See how I managed from my first promotion.” (Berg measured his life not by years but by promotions.) “My comrades are still nobodies, while I am only waiting for a vacancy to command a regiment, and have the happiness to be your husband.” (He rose and kissed Véra’s hand, and on the way to her straightened out a turned-up corner of the carpet.) “And how have I obtained all this? Chiefly by knowing how to choose my acquaintances. It goes without saying that one must be conscientious and

methodical.”

Berg smiled with a sense of his superiority over a weak woman, and paused, reflecting that this dear wife of his was after all but a weak woman who could not understand all that constitutes a man’s dignity, what it was ein Mann zu sein. * Véra at the same time smiling with a sense of superiority over her good, conscientious husband, who all the same understood life wrongly, as according to Véra all men did. Berg, judging by his wife, thought all women weak and foolish. Véra, judging only by her husband and generalizing from that observation, supposed that all men, though they understand nothing and are conceited and selfish, ascribe common sense to themselves alone.

* To be a man.

Berg rose and embraced his wife carefully, so as not to crush her lace fichu for which he had paid a good price, kissing her straight on the lips.

“The only thing is, we mustn’t have children too soon,” he continued, following an unconscious sequence of ideas.

“Yes,” answered Véra, “I don’t at all want that. We must live for society.”

“Princess Yusúpova wore one exactly like this,” said Berg, pointing to the fichu with a happy and kindly smile.

Just then Count Bezúkhov was announced. Husband and wife glanced at one another, both smiling with self-satisfaction, and each mentally claiming the honor of this visit.

“This is what comes of knowing how to make acquaintances,” thought Berg. “This is what comes of knowing how to conduct oneself.”

“But please don’t interrupt me when I am entertaining the guests,” said Véra, “because I know what interests each of them and what to say to different people.”

Berg smiled again.

“It can’t be helped: men must sometimes have masculine conversation,” said he.

They received Pierre in their small, new drawing room, where it was impossible to sit down anywhere without disturbing its symmetry, neatness, and order; so it was quite comprehensible and not strange that Berg, having generously offered to disturb the symmetry of an armchair or of the sofa for his dear guest, but being apparently painfully undecided on the matter himself, eventually left the visitor to settle the question of selection. Pierre disturbed the symmetry by moving a chair for himself, and Berg and Véra immediately began their evening party, interrupting each other in their efforts to entertain their guest.

Véra, having decided in her own mind that Pierre ought to be entertained with conversation about the French embassy, at once began accordingly. Berg, having decided that masculine conversation was required, interrupted his wife's remarks and touched on the question of the war with Austria, and unconsciously jumped from the general subject to personal considerations as to the proposals made him to take part in the Austrian campaign and the reasons why he had declined them. Though the conversation was very incoherent and Véra was angry at the intrusion of the masculine element, both husband and wife felt with satisfaction that, even if only one guest was present, their evening had begun very well and was as like as two peas to every other evening party with its talk, tea, and lighted candles.

Before long Borís, Berg's old comrade, arrived. There was a shade of condescension and patronage in his treatment of Berg and Véra. After Borís came a lady with the colonel, then the general himself, then the Rostóvs, and the party became unquestionably exactly like all other evening parties. Berg and Véra could not repress their smiles of satisfaction at the sight of all this movement in their drawing room, at the sound of the disconnected talk, the rustling of dresses, and the bowing and scraping. Everything was just as everybody always has it, especially so the general, who admired the apartment, patted Berg on the shoulder, and with parental authority superintended the setting out of the table for boston. The general sat down by Count Ilyá Rostóv, who was next to himself the most important guest. The old people sat with the old, the young with the young, and the hostess at the tea table, on which stood exactly the same kind of cakes in a silver cake basket as the Panins had at their party. Everything was just as it was everywhere else.