

CHAPTER III

In 1811 there was living in Moscow a French doctor—Métivier—who had rapidly become the fashion. He was enormously tall, handsome, amiable as Frenchmen are, and was, as all Moscow said, an extraordinarily clever doctor. He was received in the best houses not merely as a doctor, but as an equal.

Prince Nicholas had always ridiculed medicine, but latterly on Mademoiselle Bourienne's advice had allowed this doctor to visit him and had grown accustomed to him. Métivier came to see the prince about twice a week.

On December 6—St. Nicholas' Day and the prince's name day—all Moscow came to the prince's front door but he gave orders to admit no one and to invite to dinner only a small number, a list of whom he gave to Princess Mary.

Métivier, who came in the morning with his felicitations, considered it proper in his quality of doctor de forcer la consigne, * as he told Princess Mary, and went in to see the prince. It happened that on that morning of his name day the prince was in one of his worst moods. He had been going about the house all the morning finding fault with everyone and pretending not to understand what was said to him and not to be understood himself. Princess Mary well knew this mood of quiet absorbed querulousness, which generally culminated in a burst of rage, and she went about all that morning as though facing a cocked and loaded gun and awaited the inevitable explosion. Until the doctor's arrival the morning had passed off safely. After admitting the doctor, Princess Mary sat down with a book in the drawing room near the door through which she could hear all that passed in the study.

* To force the guard.

At first she heard only Métivier's voice, then her father's, then both voices began speaking at the same time, the door was flung open, and on the threshold appeared the handsome figure of the terrified Métivier with his shock of black hair, and the prince in his dressing gown and fez, his face distorted with fury and the pupils of his eyes rolled downwards.

“You don't understand?” shouted the prince, “but I do! French spy, slave of Buonaparte, spy, get out of my house! Be off, I tell you...” and he slammed the door.

Métivier, shrugging his shoulders, went up to Mademoiselle Bourienne who at the sound of shouting had run in from an adjoining room.

“The prince is not very well: bile and rush of blood to the head. Keep calm, I will call again tomorrow,” said Métivier; and putting his fingers to his lips he hastened away.

Through the study door came the sound of slippers and the cry:

“Spies, traitors, traitors everywhere! Not a moment’s peace in my own house!”

After Métivier’s departure the old prince called his daughter in, and the whole weight of his wrath fell on her. She was to blame that a spy had been admitted. Had he not told her, yes, told her to make a list, and not to admit anyone who was not on that list? Then why was that scoundrel admitted? She was the cause of it all. With her, he said, he could not have a moment’s peace and could not die quietly.

“No, ma’am! We must part, we must part! Understand that, understand it! I cannot endure any more,” he said, and left the room. Then, as if afraid she might find some means of consolation, he returned and trying to appear calm added: “And don’t imagine I have said this in a moment of anger. I am calm. I have thought it over, and it will be carried out—we must part; so find some place for yourself....” But he could not restrain himself and with the virulence of which only one who loves is capable, evidently suffering himself, he shook his fists at her and screamed:

“If only some fool would marry her!” Then he slammed the door, sent for Mademoiselle Bourienne, and subsided into his study.

At two o’clock the six chosen guests assembled for dinner.

These guests—the famous Count Rostopchín, Prince Lopukhín with his nephew, General Chatróv an old war comrade of the prince’s, and of the younger generation Pierre and Borís Drubetskóy—awaited the prince in the drawing room.

Borís, who had come to Moscow on leave a few days before, had been anxious to be presented to Prince Nicholas Bolkónski, and had contrived to ingratiate himself so well that the old prince in his case made an exception to the rule of not receiving bachelors in his house.

The prince’s house did not belong to what is known as fashionable society, but his little circle—though not much talked about in town—was one it was more flattering to be received in than any other. Borís had realized this the week before when the commander in chief in his presence invited Rostopchín to dinner on St. Nicholas’ Day, and Rostopchín had replied that he could not come:

“On that day I always go to pay my devotions to the relics of Prince Nicholas Bolkónski.”

“Oh, yes, yes!” replied the commander in chief. “How is he?...”

The small group that assembled before dinner in the lofty old-fashioned drawing room with its old furniture resembled the solemn gathering of a court of justice. All were silent or talked in low tones. Prince Nicholas came in serious and taciturn. Princess Mary seemed even quieter and more diffident than usual. The guests were reluctant to address her, feeling that she was in no mood for their conversation. Count Rostopchín alone kept the conversation going, now relating the latest

town news, and now the latest political gossip.

Lopukhín and the old general occasionally took part in the conversation. Prince Bolkónski listened as a presiding judge receives a report, only now and then, silently or by a brief word, showing that he took heed of what was being reported to him. The tone of the conversation was such as indicated that no one approved of what was being done in the political world. Incidents were related evidently confirming the opinion that everything was going from bad to worse, but whether telling a story or giving an opinion the speaker always stopped, or was stopped, at the point beyond which his criticism might touch the sovereign himself.

At dinner the talk turned on the latest political news: Napoleon's seizure of the Duke of Oldenburg's territory, and the Russian Note, hostile to Napoleon, which had been sent to all the European courts.

"Bonaparte treats Europe as a pirate does a captured vessel," said Count Rostopchín, repeating a phrase he had uttered several times before. "One only wonders at the long-suffering or blindness of the crowned heads. Now the Pope's turn has come and Bonaparte doesn't scruple to depose the head of the Catholic Church—yet all keep silent! Our sovereign alone has protested against the seizure of the Duke of Oldenburg's territory, and even..." Count Rostopchín paused, feeling that he had reached the limit beyond which censure was impossible.

"Other territories have been offered in exchange for the Duchy of Oldenburg," said Prince Bolkónski. "He shifts the Dukes about as I might move my serfs from Bald Hills to Boguchárovo or my Ryazán estates."

"The Duke of Oldenburg bears his misfortunes with admirable strength of character and resignation," remarked Borís, joining in respectfully.

He said this because on his journey from Petersburg he had had the honor of being presented to the Duke. Prince Bolkónski glanced at the young man as if about to say something in reply, but changed his mind, evidently considering him too young.

"I have read our protests about the Oldenburg affair and was surprised how badly the Note was worded," remarked Count Rostopchín in the casual tone of a man dealing with a subject quite familiar to him.

Pierre looked at Rostopchín with naïve astonishment, not understanding why he should be disturbed by the bad composition of the Note.

"Does it matter, Count, how the Note is worded," he asked, "so long as its substance is forcible?"

"My dear fellow, with our five hundred thousand troops it should be easy to have a good style," returned Count Rostopchín.

Pierre now understood the count's dissatisfaction with the wording of the Note.

"One would have thought quill drivers enough had sprung up," remarked the old prince. "There in Petersburg they are always writing—not notes only but even new laws. My Andrew there has written a whole volume of laws for Russia. Nowadays they are always writing!" and he laughed unnaturally.

There was a momentary pause in the conversation; the old general cleared his throat to draw attention.

"Did you hear of the last event at the review in Petersburg? The figure cut by the new French ambassador."

"Eh? Yes, I heard something: he said something awkward in His Majesty's presence."

"His Majesty drew attention to the Grenadier division and to the march past," continued the general, "and it seems the ambassador took no notice and allowed himself to reply that: 'We in France pay no attention to such trifles!' The Emperor did not condescend to reply. At the next review, they say, the Emperor did not once deign to address him."

All were silent. On this fact relating to the Emperor personally, it was impossible to pass any judgment.

"Impudent fellows!" said the prince. "You know Métivier? I turned him out of my house this morning. He was here; they admitted him in spite of my request that they should let no one in," he went on, glancing angrily at his daughter.

And he narrated his whole conversation with the French doctor and the reasons that convinced him that Métivier was a spy. Though these reasons were very insufficient and obscure, no one made any rejoinder.

After the roast, champagne was served. The guests rose to congratulate the old prince. Princess Mary, too, went round to him.

He gave her a cold, angry look and offered her his wrinkled, clean-shaven cheek to kiss. The whole expression of his face told her that he had not forgotten the morning's talk, that his decision remained in force, and only the presence of visitors hindered his speaking of it to her now.

When they went into the drawing room where coffee was served, the old men sat together.

Prince Nicholas grew more animated and expressed his views on the impending war.

He said that our wars with Bonaparte would be disastrous so long as we sought alliances with the Germans and thrust ourselves into European

affairs, into which we had been drawn by the Peace of Tilsit. "We ought not to fight either for or against Austria. Our political interests are all in the East, and in regard to Bonaparte the only thing is to have an armed frontier and a firm policy, and he will never dare to cross the Russian frontier, as was the case in 1807!"

"How can we fight the French, Prince?" said Count Rostopchín.
"Can we arm ourselves against our teachers and divinities? Look at our youths, look at our ladies! The French are our Gods: Paris is our Kingdom of Heaven."

He began speaking louder, evidently to be heard by everyone.

"French dresses, French ideas, French feelings! There now, you turned Métivier out by the scruff of his neck because he is a Frenchman and a scoundrel, but our ladies crawl after him on their knees. I went to a party last night, and there out of five ladies three were Roman Catholics and had the Pope's indulgence for doing woolwork on Sundays. And they themselves sit there nearly naked, like the signboards at our Public Baths if I may say so. Ah, when one looks at our young people, Prince, one would like to take Peter the Great's old cudgel out of the museum and belabor them in the Russian way till all the nonsense jumps out of them."

All were silent. The old prince looked at Rostopchín with a smile and wagged his head approvingly.

"Well, good-by, your excellency, keep well!" said Rostopchín, getting up with characteristic briskness and holding out his hand to the prince.

"Good-by, my dear fellow.... His words are music, I never tire of hearing him!" said the old prince, keeping hold of the hand and offering his cheek to be kissed.

Following Rostopchín's example the others also rose.