

CHAPTER XXIII

At that moment Count Rostopchín with his protruding chin and alert eyes, wearing the uniform of a general with sash over his shoulder, entered the room, stepping briskly to the front of the crowd of gentry.

“Our sovereign the Emperor will be here in a moment,” said Rostopchín. “I am straight from the palace. Seeing the position we are in, I think there is little need for discussion. The Emperor has deigned to summon us and the merchants. Millions will pour forth from there”—he pointed to the merchants’ hall—“but our business is to supply men and not spare ourselves.... That is the least we can do!”

A conference took place confined to the magnates sitting at the table. The whole consultation passed more than quietly. After all the preceding noise the sound of their old voices saying one after another, “I agree,” or for variety, “I too am of that opinion,” and so on had even a mournful effect.

The secretary was told to write down the resolution of the Moscow nobility and gentry, that they would furnish ten men, fully equipped, out of every thousand serfs, as the Smolénsk gentry had done. Their chairs made a scraping noise as the gentlemen who had conferred rose with apparent relief, and began walking up and down, arm in arm, to stretch their legs and converse in couples.

“The Emperor! The Emperor!” a sudden cry resounded through the halls and the whole throng hurried to the entrance.

The Emperor entered the hall through a broad path between two lines of nobles. Every face expressed respectful, awe-struck curiosity. Pierre stood rather far off and could not hear all that the Emperor said. From what he did hear he understood that the Emperor spoke of the danger threatening the empire and of the hopes he placed on the Moscow nobility. He was answered by a voice which informed him of the resolution just arrived at.

“Gentlemen!” said the Emperor with a quivering voice.

There was a rustling among the crowd and it again subsided, so that Pierre distinctly heard the pleasantly human voice of the Emperor saying with emotion:

“I never doubted the devotion of the Russian nobles, but today it has surpassed my expectations. I thank you in the name of the Fatherland! Gentlemen, let us act! Time is most precious....”

The Emperor ceased speaking, the crowd began pressing round him, and rapturous exclamations were heard from all sides.

“Yes, most precious... a royal word,” said Count Rostóv, with a sob. He stood at the back, and, though he had heard hardly anything, understood everything in his own way.

From the hall of the nobility the Emperor went to that of the merchants. There he remained about ten minutes. Pierre was among those who saw him come out from the merchants' hall with tears of emotion in his eyes. As became known later, he had scarcely begun to address the merchants before tears gushed from his eyes and he concluded in a trembling voice. When Pierre saw the Emperor he was coming out accompanied by two merchants, one of whom Pierre knew, a fat otkupshchík. The other was the mayor, a man with a thin sallow face and narrow beard. Both were weeping. Tears filled the thin man's eyes, and the fat otkupshchík sobbed outright like a child and kept repeating:

“Our lives and property—take them, Your Majesty!”

Pierre's one feeling at the moment was a desire to show that he was ready to go all lengths and was prepared to sacrifice everything. He now felt ashamed of his speech with its constitutional tendency and sought an opportunity of effacing it. Having heard that Count Mamónov was furnishing a regiment, Bezúkhov at once informed Rostopchín that he would give a thousand men and their maintenance.

Old Rostóv could not tell his wife of what had passed without tears, and at once consented to Pétya's request and went himself to enter his name.

Next day the Emperor left Moscow. The assembled nobles all took off their uniforms and settled down again in their homes and clubs, and not without some groans gave orders to their stewards about the enrollment, feeling amazed themselves at what they had done.