CHAPTER III

When Michael Iványovich returned to the study with the letter, the old prince, with spectacles on and a shade over his eyes, was sitting at his open bureau with screened candles, holding a paper in his outstretched hand, and in a somewhat dramatic attitude was reading his manuscript—his "Remarks" as he termed it—which was to be transmitted to the Emperor after his death.

When Michael Iványovich went in there were tears in the prince's eyes evoked by the memory of the time when the paper he was now reading had been written. He took the letter from Michael Iványovich's hand, put it in his pocket, folded up his papers, and called in Alpátych who had long been waiting.

The prince had a list of things to be bought in Smolénsk and, walking up and down the room past Alpátych who stood by the door, he gave his instructions.

"First, notepaper—do you hear? Eight quires, like this sample, gilt-edged... it must be exactly like the sample. Varnish, sealing wax, as in Michael Iványovich's list."

He paced up and down for a while and glanced at his notes.

"Then hand to the governor in person a letter about the deed."

Next, bolts for the doors of the new building were wanted and had to be of a special shape the prince had himself designed, and a leather case had to be ordered to keep the "will" in.

The instructions to Alpátych took over two hours and still the prince did not let him go. He sat down, sank into thought, closed his eyes, and dozed off. Alpátych made a slight movement.

"Well, go, go! If anything more is wanted I'll send after you."

Alpátych went out. The prince again went to his bureau, glanced into it, fingered his papers, closed the bureau again, and sat down at the table to write to the governor.

It was already late when he rose after sealing the letter. He wished to sleep, but he knew he would not be able to and that most depressing thoughts came to him in bed. So he called Tíkhon and went through the rooms with him to show him where to set up the bed for that night.

He went about looking at every corner. Every place seemed unsatisfactory, but worst of all was his customary couch in the study. That couch was dreadful to him, probably because of the oppressive thoughts he had had when lying there. It was unsatisfactory everywhere, but the corner behind the piano in the sitting room was better than other places: he had never slept there yet.

With the help of a footman Tíkhon brought in the bedstead and began putting it up.

“That’s not right! That’s not right!” cried the prince, and himself pushed it a few inches from the corner and then closer in again.

“Well, at last I’ve finished, now I’ll rest,” thought the prince, and let Tíkhon undress him.

Frowning with vexation at the effort necessary to divest himself of his coat and trousers, the prince undressed, sat down heavily on the bed, and appeared to be meditating as he looked contemptuously at his withered yellow legs. He was not meditating, but only deferring the moment of making the effort to lift those legs up and turn over on the bed. “Ugh, how hard it is! Oh, that this toil might end and you would release me!” thought he. Pressing his lips together he made that effort for the twenty-thousandth time and lay down. But hardly had he done so before he felt the bed rocking backwards and forwards beneath him as if it were breathing heavily and jolting. This happened to him almost every night. He opened his eyes as they were closing.

“No peace, damn them!” he muttered, angry he knew not with whom. “Ah yes, there was something else important, very important, that I was keeping till I should be in bed. The bolts? No, I told him about them. No, it was something, something in the drawing room. Princess Mary talked some nonsense. Dessalles, that fool, said something. Something in my pocket—can’t remember....”

“Tíkhon, what did we talk about at dinner?”

“About Prince Michael...”

“Be quiet, quiet!” The prince slapped his hand on the table. “Yes, I know, Prince Andrew’s letter! Princess Mary read it. Dessalles said something about Vítebsk. Now I’ll read it.”

He had the letter taken from his pocket and the table—on which stood a glass of lemonade and a spiral wax candle—moved close to the bed, and putting on his spectacles he began reading. Only now in the stillness of the night, reading it by the faint light under the green shade, did he grasp its meaning for a moment.

“The French at Vítebsk, in four days’ march they may be at Smolénsk; perhaps are already there! Tíkhon!” Tíkhon jumped up. “No, no, I don’t want anything!” he shouted.

He put the letter under the candlestick and closed his eyes. And there rose before him the Danube at bright noonday: reeds, the Russian camp, and himself a young general without a wrinkle on his ruddy face, vigorous and alert, entering Potëmkin’s gaily colored tent, and a burning sense of jealousy of “the favorite” agitated him now as strongly as it had done then. He recalled all the words spoken at that first meeting with Potëmkin. And he saw before him a plump, rather sallow-faced, short, stout woman, the Empress Mother, with her smile

and her words at her first gracious reception of him, and then that same face on the catafalque, and the encounter he had with Zúbov over her coffin about his right to kiss her hand.

“Oh, quicker, quicker! To get back to that time and have done with all the present! Quicker, quicker—and that they should leave me in peace!”