

CHAPTER VI

Hélène, having returned with the court from VÍlna to Petersburg, found herself in a difficult position.

In Petersburg she had enjoyed the special protection of a grandee who occupied one of the highest posts in the Empire. In VÍlna she had formed an intimacy with a young foreign prince. When she returned to Petersburg both the magnate and the prince were there, and both claimed their rights. Hélène was faced by a new problem—how to preserve her intimacy with both without offending either.

What would have seemed difficult or even impossible to another woman did not cause the least embarrassment to Countess Bezúkhova, who evidently deserved her reputation of being a very clever woman. Had she attempted concealment, or tried to extricate herself from her awkward position by cunning, she would have spoiled her case by acknowledging herself guilty. But Hélène, like a really great man who can do whatever he pleases, at once assumed her own position to be correct, as she sincerely believed it to be, and that everyone else was to blame.

The first time the young foreigner allowed himself to reproach her, she lifted her beautiful head and, half turning to him, said firmly: “That’s just like a man—selfish and cruel! I expected nothing else. A woman sacrifices herself for you, she suffers, and this is her reward! What right have you, monseigneur, to demand an account of my attachments and friendships? He is a man who has been more than a father to me!” The prince was about to say something, but Hélène interrupted him.

“Well, yes,” said she, “it may be that he has other sentiments for me than those of a father, but that is not a reason for me to shut my door on him. I am not a man, that I should repay kindness with ingratitude! Know, monseigneur, that in all that relates to my intimate feelings I render account only to God and to my conscience,” she concluded, laying her hand on her beautiful, fully expanded bosom and looking up to heaven.

“But for heaven’s sake listen to me!”

“Marry me, and I will be your slave!”

“But that’s impossible.”

“You won’t deign to demean yourself by marrying me, you...” said Hélène, beginning to cry.

The prince tried to comfort her, but Hélène, as if quite distraught, said through her tears that there was nothing to prevent her marrying, that there were precedents (there were up to that time very few, but she mentioned Napoleon and some other exalted personages), that she had never been her husband’s wife, and that she had been sacrificed.

“But the law, religion...” said the prince, already yielding.

“The law, religion... What have they been invented for if they can’t arrange that?” said H  l  ne.

The prince was surprised that so simple an idea had not occurred to him, and he applied for advice to the holy brethren of the Society of Jesus, with whom he was on intimate terms.

A few days later at one of those enchanting fetes which H  l  ne gave at her country house on the Stone Island, the charming Monsieur de Jobert, a man no longer young, with snow white hair and brilliant black eyes, a Jesuit    robe courte * was presented to her, and in the garden by the light of the illuminations and to the sound of music talked to her for a long time of the love of God, of Christ, of the Sacred Heart, and of the consolations the one true Catholic religion affords in this world and the next. H  l  ne was touched, and more than once tears rose to her eyes and to those of Monsieur de Jobert and their voices trembled. A dance, for which her partner came to seek her, put an end to her discourse with her future directeur de conscience, but the next evening Monsieur de Jobert came to see H  l  ne when she was alone, and after that often came again.

* Lay member of the Society of Jesus.

One day he took the countess to a Roman Catholic church, where she knelt down before the altar to which she was led. The enchanting, middle-aged Frenchman laid his hands on her head and, as she herself afterward described it, she felt something like a fresh breeze wafted into her soul. It was explained to her that this was la gr  ce.

After that a long-frocked abb   was brought to her. She confessed to him, and he absolved her from her sins. Next day she received a box containing the Sacred Host, which was left at her house for her to partake of. A few days later H  l  ne learned with pleasure that she had now been admitted to the true Catholic Church and that in a few days the Pope himself would hear of her and would send her a certain document.

All that was done around her and to her at this time, all the attention devoted to her by so many clever men and expressed in such pleasant, refined ways, and the state of dove-like purity she was now in (she wore only white dresses and white ribbons all that time) gave her pleasure, but her pleasure did not cause her for a moment to forget her aim. And as it always happens in contests of cunning that a stupid person gets the better of cleverer ones, H  l  ne—having realized that the main object of all these words and all this trouble was, after converting her to Catholicism, to obtain money from her for Jesuit institutions (as to which she received indications)—before parting with her money insisted that the various operations necessary to free her from her husband should be performed. In her view the aim of every religion was merely to preserve certain proprieties while affording satisfaction to human desires. And with this aim, in one of her talks with her Father Confessor, she insisted on an answer to the question, in how far was she bound by her marriage?

They were sitting in the twilight by a window in the drawing room. The scent of flowers came in at the window. H  l  ne was wearing a white dress, transparent over her shoulders and bosom. The abb  , a well-fed man with a plump, clean-shaven chin, a pleasant firm mouth, and white hands meekly folded on his knees, sat close to H  l  ne and, with a subtle smile on his lips and a peaceful look of delight at her beauty, occasionally glanced at her face as he explained his opinion on the subject. H  l  ne with an uneasy smile looked at his curly hair and his plump, clean-shaven, blackish cheeks and every moment expected the conversation to take a fresh turn. But the abb  , though he evidently enjoyed the beauty of his companion, was absorbed in his mastery of the matter.

The course of the Father Confessor's arguments ran as follows: "Ignorant of the import of what you were undertaking, you made a vow of conjugal fidelity to a man who on his part, by entering the married state without faith in the religious significance of marriage, committed an act of sacrilege. That marriage lacked the dual significance it should have had. Yet in spite of this your vow was binding. You swerved from it. What did you commit by so acting? A venial, or a mortal, sin? A venial sin, for you acted without evil intention. If now you married again with the object of bearing children, your sin might be forgiven. But the question is again a twofold one: firstly..."

But suddenly H  l  ne, who was getting bored, said with one of her bewitching smiles: "But I think that having espoused the true religion I cannot be bound by what a false religion laid upon me."

The director of her conscience was astounded at having the case presented to him thus with the simplicity of Columbus' egg. He was delighted at the unexpected rapidity of his pupil's progress, but could not abandon the edifice of argument he had laboriously constructed.

"Let us understand one another, Countess," said he with a smile, and began refuting his spiritual daughter's arguments.