

CHAPTER VII

Hélène understood that the question was very simple and easy from the ecclesiastical point of view, and that her directors were making difficulties only because they were apprehensive as to how the matter would be regarded by the secular authorities.

So she decided that it was necessary to prepare the opinion of society. She provoked the jealousy of the elderly magnate and told him what she had told her other suitor; that is, she put the matter so that the only way for him to obtain a right over her was to marry her. The elderly magnate was at first as much taken aback by this suggestion of marriage with a woman whose husband was alive, as the younger man had been, but Hélène's imperturbable conviction that it was as simple and natural as marrying a maiden had its effect on him too. Had Hélène herself shown the least sign of hesitation, shame, or secrecy, her cause would certainly have been lost; but not only did she show no signs of secrecy or shame, on the contrary, with good-natured naïveté she told her intimate friends (and these were all Petersburg) that both the prince and the magnate had proposed to her and that she loved both and was afraid of grieving either.

A rumor immediately spread in Petersburg, not that Hélène wanted to be divorced from her husband (had such a report spread many would have opposed so illegal an intention) but simply that the unfortunate and interesting Hélène was in doubt which of the two men she should marry. The question was no longer whether this was possible, but only which was the better match and how the matter would be regarded at court. There were, it is true, some rigid individuals unable to rise to the height of such a question, who saw in the project a desecration of the sacrament of marriage, but there were not many such and they remained silent, while the majority were interested in Hélène's good fortune and in the question which match would be the more advantageous. Whether it was right or wrong to remarry while one had a husband living they did not discuss, for that question had evidently been settled by people "wiser than you or me," as they said, and to doubt the correctness of that decision would be to risk exposing one's stupidity and incapacity to live in society.

Only Márya Dmítrievna Akhrosímovna, who had come to Petersburg that summer to see one of her sons, allowed herself plainly to express an opinion contrary to the general one. Meeting Hélène at a ball she stopped her in the middle of the room and, amid general silence, said in her gruff voice: "So wives of living men have started marrying again! Perhaps you think you have invented a novelty? You have been forestalled, my dear! It was thought of long ago. It is done in all the brothels," and with these words Márya Dmítrievna, turning up her wide sleeves with her usual threatening gesture and glancing sternly round, moved across the room.

Though people were afraid of Márya Dmítrievna she was regarded in Petersburg as a buffoon, and so of what she had said they only noticed, and repeated in a whisper, the one coarse word she had used, supposing

the whole sting of her remark to lie in that word.

Prince Vasíli, who of late very often forgot what he had said and repeated one and the same thing a hundred times, remarked to his daughter whenever he chanced to see her:

“Hélène, I have a word to say to you,” and he would lead her aside, drawing her hand downward. “I have heard of certain projects concerning... you know. Well my dear child, you know how your father’s heart rejoices to know that you... You have suffered so much.... But, my dear child, consult only your own heart. That is all I have to say,” and concealing his unvarying emotion he would press his cheek against his daughter’s and move away.

Bilíbin, who had not lost his reputation of an exceedingly clever man, and who was one of the disinterested friends so brilliant a woman as Hélène always has—men friends who can never change into lovers—once gave her his view of the matter at a small and intimate gathering.

“Listen, Bilíbin,” said Hélène (she always called friends of that sort by their surnames), and she touched his coat sleeve with her white, beringed fingers. “Tell me, as you would a sister, what I ought to do. Which of the two?”

Bilíbin wrinkled up the skin over his eyebrows and pondered, with a smile on his lips.

“You are not taking me unawares, you know,” said he. “As a true friend, I have thought and thought again about your affair. You see, if you marry the prince”—he meant the younger man—and he crooked one finger, “you forever lose the chance of marrying the other, and you will displease the court besides. (You know there is some kind of connection.) But if you marry the old count you will make his last days happy, and as widow of the Grand... the prince would no longer be making a mésalliance by marrying you,” and Bilíbin smoothed out his forehead.

“That’s a true friend!” said Hélène beaming, and again touching Bilíbin’s sleeve. “But I love them, you know, and don’t want to distress either of them. I would give my life for the happiness of them both.”

Bilíbin shrugged his shoulders, as much as to say that not even he could help in that difficulty.

“Une maîtresse-femme! * That’s what is called putting things squarely. She would like to be married to all three at the same time,” thought he.

* A masterly woman.

“But tell me, how will your husband look at the matter?” Bilíbin asked, his reputation being so well established that he did not fear to ask so naïve a question. “Will he agree?”

“Oh, he loves me so!” said Hélène, who for some reason imagined that Pierre too loved her. “He will do anything for me.”

Bilíbin puckered his skin in preparation for something witty.

“Even divorce you?” said he.

Hélène laughed.

Among those who ventured to doubt the justifiability of the proposed marriage was Hélène’s mother, Princess Kurágina. She was continually tormented by jealousy of her daughter, and now that jealousy concerned a subject near to her own heart, she could not reconcile herself to the idea. She consulted a Russian priest as to the possibility of divorce and remarriage during a husband’s lifetime, and the priest told her that it was impossible, and to her delight showed her a text in the Gospel which (as it seemed to him) plainly forbids remarriage while the husband is alive.

Armed with these arguments, which appeared to her unanswerable, she drove to her daughter’s early one morning so as to find her alone.

Having listened to her mother’s objections, Hélène smiled blandly and ironically.

“But it says plainly: ‘Whosoever shall marry her that is divorced...’” said the old princess.

“Ah, Maman, ne dites pas de bêtises. Vous ne comprenez rien. Dans ma position j’ai des devoirs,” * said Hélène changing from Russian, in which language she always felt that her case did not sound quite clear, into French which suited it better.

* “Oh, Mamma, don’t talk nonsense! You don’t understand anything. In my position I have obligations.”

“But, my dear....”

“Oh, Mamma, how is it you don’t understand that the Holy Father, who has the right to grant dispensations...”

Just then the lady companion who lived with Hélène came in to announce that His Highness was in the ballroom and wished to see her.

“Non, dites-lui que je ne veux pas le voir, que je suis furieuse contre lui, parce qu’il m’a manqué parole.” *

* “No, tell him I don’t wish to see him, I am furious with him for not keeping his word to me.”

“Comtesse, à tout péché miséricorde,” * said a fair-haired young man with a long face and nose, as he entered the room.

* “Countess, there is mercy for every sin.”

The old princess rose respectfully and curtsied. The young man who had entered took no notice of her. The princess nodded to her daughter and sidled out of the room.

“Yes, she is right,” thought the old princess, all her convictions dissipated by the appearance of His Highness. “She is right, but how is it that we in our irrecoverable youth did not know it? Yet it is so simple,” she thought as she got into her carriage.

By the beginning of August Hélène’s affairs were clearly defined and she wrote a letter to her husband—who, as she imagined, loved her very much—informing him of her intention to marry N.N. and of her having embraced the one true faith, and asking him to carry out all the formalities necessary for a divorce, which would be explained to him by the bearer of the letter.

And so I pray God to have you, my friend, in His holy and powerful keeping—Your friend Hélène.

This letter was brought to Pierre’s house when he was on the field of Borodinó.