

CHAPTER XVIII

For the last two days, ever since leaving home, Pierre had been living in the empty house of his deceased benefactor, Bazdév. This is how it happened.

When he woke up on the morning after his return to Moscow and his interview with Count Rostopchín, he could not for some time make out where he was and what was expected of him. When he was informed that among others awaiting him in his reception room there was a Frenchman who had brought a letter from his wife, the Countess Héléne, he felt suddenly overcome by that sense of confusion and hopelessness to which he was apt to succumb. He felt that everything was now at an end, all was in confusion and crumbling to pieces, that nobody was right or wrong, the future held nothing, and there was no escape from this position. Smiling unnaturally and muttering to himself, he first sat down on the sofa in an attitude of despair, then rose, went to the door of the reception room and peeped through the crack, returned flourishing his arms, and took up a book. His major-domo came in a second time to say that the Frenchman who had brought the letter from the countess was very anxious to see him if only for a minute, and that someone from Bazdév's widow had called to ask Pierre to take charge of her husband's books, as she herself was leaving for the country.

"Oh, yes, in a minute; wait... or no! No, of course... go and say I will come directly," Pierre replied to the major-domo.

But as soon as the man had left the room Pierre took up his hat which was lying on the table and went out of his study by the other door. There was no one in the passage. He went along the whole length of this passage to the stairs and, frowning and rubbing his forehead with both hands, went down as far as the first landing. The hall porter was standing at the front door. From the landing where Pierre stood there was a second staircase leading to the back entrance. He went down that staircase and out into the yard. No one had seen him. But there were some carriages waiting, and as soon as Pierre stepped out of the gate the coachmen and the yard porter noticed him and raised their caps to him. When he felt he was being looked at he behaved like an ostrich which hides its head in a bush in order not to be seen: he hung his head and quickening his pace went down the street.

Of all the affairs awaiting Pierre that day the sorting of Joseph Bazdév's books and papers appeared to him the most necessary.

He hired the first cab he met and told the driver to go to the Patriarch's Ponds, where the widow Bazdév's house was.

Continually turning round to look at the rows of loaded carts that were making their way from all sides out of Moscow, and balancing his bulky body so as not to slip out of the ramshackle old vehicle, Pierre, experiencing the joyful feeling of a boy escaping from school, began to talk to his driver.

The man told him that arms were being distributed today at the Krémelin and that tomorrow everyone would be sent out beyond the Three Hills gates and a great battle would be fought there.

Having reached the Patriarch's Ponds Pierre found the Bazdéevs' house, where he had not been for a long time past. He went up to the gate. Gerásim, that sallow beardless old man Pierre had seen at Torzhók five years before with Joseph Bazdéev, came out in answer to his knock.

"At home?" asked Pierre.

"Owing to the present state of things Sophia Danílovna has gone to the Torzhók estate with the children, your excellency."

"I will come in all the same, I have to look through the books," said Pierre.

"Be so good as to step in. Makár Alexéevich, the brother of my late master—may the kingdom of heaven be his—has remained here, but he is in a weak state as you know," said the old servant.

Pierre knew that Makár Alexéevich was Joseph Bazdéev's half-insane brother and a hard drinker.

"Yes, yes, I know. Let us go in..." said Pierre and entered the house.

A tall, bald-headed old man with a red nose, wearing a dressing gown and with galoshes on his bare feet, stood in the anteroom. On seeing Pierre he muttered something angrily and went away along the passage.

"He was a very clever man but has now grown quite feeble, as your honor sees," said Gerásim. "Will you step into the study?" Pierre nodded. "As it was sealed up so it has remained, but Sophia Danílovna gave orders that if anyone should come from you they were to have the books."

Pierre went into that gloomy study which he had entered with such trepidation in his benefactor's lifetime. The room, dusty and untouched since the death of Joseph Bazdéev was now even gloomier.

Gerásim opened one of the shutters and left the room on tiptoe. Pierre went round the study, approached the cupboard in which the manuscripts were kept, and took out what had once been one of the most important, the holy of holies of the order. This was the authentic Scotch Acts with Bazdéev's notes and explanations. He sat down at the dusty writing table, and, having laid the manuscripts before him, opened them out, closed them, finally pushed them away, and resting his head on his hand sank into meditation.

Gerásim looked cautiously into the study several times and saw Pierre always sitting in the same attitude.

More than two hours passed and Gerásim took the liberty of making a slight noise at the door to attract his attention, but Pierre did not hear him.

“Is the cabman to be discharged, your honor?”

“Oh yes!” said Pierre, rousing himself and rising hurriedly. “Look here,” he added, taking Gerásim by a button of his coat and looking down at the old man with moist, shining, and ecstatic eyes, “I say, do you know that there is going to be a battle tomorrow?”

“We heard so,” replied the man.

“I beg you not to tell anyone who I am, and to do what I ask you.”

“Yes, your excellency,” replied Gerásim. “Will you have something to eat?”

“No, but I want something else. I want peasant clothes and a pistol,” said Pierre, unexpectedly blushing.

“Yes, your excellency,” said Gerásim after thinking for a moment.

All the rest of that day Pierre spent alone in his benefactor’s study, and Gerásim heard him pacing restlessly from one corner to another and talking to himself. And he spent the night on a bed made up for him there.

Gerásim, being a servant who in his time had seen many strange things, accepted Pierre’s taking up his residence in the house without surprise, and seemed pleased to have someone to wait on. That same evening—without even asking himself what they were wanted for—he procured a coachman’s coat and cap for Pierre, and promised to get him the pistol next day. Makár Alexéevich came twice that evening shuffling along in his galoshes as far as the door and stopped and looked ingratiatingly at Pierre. But as soon as Pierre turned toward him he wrapped his dressing gown around him with a shamefaced and angry look and hurried away. It was when Pierre (wearing the coachman’s coat which Gerásim had procured for him and had disinfected by steam) was on his way with the old man to buy the pistol at the Súkharev market that he met the Rostóvs.