

CHAPTER XXII

Meanwhile, the city itself was deserted. There was hardly anyone in the streets. The gates and shops were all closed, only here and there round the taverns solitary shouts or drunken songs could be heard. Nobody drove through the streets and footsteps were rarely heard. The Povarskáya was quite still and deserted. The huge courtyard of the Rostóvs' house was littered with wisps of hay and with dung from the horses, and not a soul was to be seen there. In the great drawing room of the house, which had been left with all it contained, were two people. They were the yard porter Ignát, and the page boy Míshka, Vasílich's grandson who had stayed in Moscow with his grandfather. Míshka had opened the clavichord and was strumming on it with one finger. The yard porter, his arms akimbo, stood smiling with satisfaction before the large mirror.

"Isn't it fine, eh, Uncle Ignát?" said the boy, suddenly beginning to strike the keyboard with both hands.

"Only fancy!" answered Ignát, surprised at the broadening grin on his face in the mirror.

"Impudence! Impudence!" they heard behind them the voice of Mávra Kuzmínichna who had entered silently. "How he's grinning, the fat mug! Is that what you're here for? Nothing's cleared away down there and Vasílich is worn out. Just you wait a bit!"

Ignát left off smiling, adjusted his belt, and went out of the room with meekly downcast eyes.

"Aunt, I did it gently," said the boy.

"I'll give you something gently, you monkey you!" cried Mávra Kuzmínichna, raising her arm threateningly. "Go and get the samovar to boil for your grandfather."

Mávra Kuzmínichna flicked the dust off the clavichord and closed it, and with a deep sigh left the drawing room and locked its main door.

Going out into the yard she paused to consider where she should go next—to drink tea in the servants' wing with Vasílich, or into the storeroom to put away what still lay about.

She heard the sound of quick footsteps in the quiet street. Someone stopped at the gate, and the latch rattled as someone tried to open it. Mávra Kuzmínichna went to the gate.

"Who do you want?"

"The count—Count Ilyá Andréévich Rostóv."

"And who are you?"

“An officer, I have to see him,” came the reply in a pleasant, well-bred Russian voice.

Mávra Kuzmínichna opened the gate and an officer of eighteen, with the round face of a Rostóv, entered the yard.

“They have gone away, sir. Went away yesterday at vespertime,” said Mávra Kuzmínichna cordially.

The young officer standing in the gateway, as if hesitating whether to enter or not, clicked his tongue.

“Ah, how annoying!” he muttered. “I should have come yesterday.... Ah, what a pity.”

Meanwhile, Mávra Kuzmínichna was attentively and sympathetically examining the familiar Rostóv features of the young man’s face, his tattered coat and trodden-down boots.

“What did you want to see the count for?” she asked.

“Oh well... it can’t be helped!” said he in a tone of vexation and placed his hand on the gate as if to leave.

He again paused in indecision.

“You see,” he suddenly said, “I am a kinsman of the count’s and he has been very kind to me. As you see” (he glanced with an amused air and good-natured smile at his coat and boots) “my things are worn out and I have no money, so I was going to ask the count...”

Mávra Kuzmínichna did not let him finish.

“Just wait a minute, sir. One little moment,” said she.

And as soon as the officer let go of the gate handle she turned and, hurrying away on her old legs, went through the back yard to the servants’ quarters.

While Mávra Kuzmínichna was running to her room the officer walked about the yard gazing at his worn-out boots with lowered head and a faint smile on his lips. “What a pity I’ve missed Uncle! What a nice old woman! Where has she run off to? And how am I to find the nearest way to overtake my regiment, which must by now be getting near the Rogózhski gate?” thought he. Just then Mávra Kuzmínichna appeared from behind the corner of the house with a frightened yet resolute look, carrying a rolled-up check kerchief in her hand. While still a few steps from the officer she unfolded the kerchief and took out of it a white twenty-five-ruble assignat and hastily handed it to him.

“If his excellency had been at home, as a kinsman he would of course... but as it is...”

Mávra Kuzmínichna grew abashed and confused. The officer did not

decline, but took the note quietly and thanked her.

“If the count had been at home...” Mávra Kuzmínichna went on apologetically. “Christ be with you, sir! May God preserve you!” said she, bowing as she saw him out.

Swaying his head and smiling as if amused at himself, the officer ran almost at a trot through the deserted streets toward the Yaúza bridge to overtake his regiment.

But Mávra Kuzmínichna stood at the closed gate for some time with moist eyes, pensively swaying her head and feeling an unexpected flow of motherly tenderness and pity for the unknown young officer.