

CHAPTER XXVIII

Pierre, having decided that until he had carried out his design he would disclose neither his identity nor his knowledge of French, stood at the half-open door of the corridor, intending to conceal himself as soon as the French entered. But the French entered and still Pierre did not retire—an irresistible curiosity kept him there.

There were two of them. One was an officer—a tall, soldierly, handsome man—the other evidently a private or an orderly, sunburned, short, and thin, with sunken cheeks and a dull expression. The officer walked in front, leaning on a stick and slightly limping. When he had advanced a few steps he stopped, having apparently decided that these were good quarters, turned round to the soldiers standing at the entrance, and in a loud voice of command ordered them to put up the horses. Having done that, the officer, lifting his elbow with a smart gesture, stroked his mustache and lightly touched his hat.

“Bonjour, la compagnie!” * said he gaily, smiling and looking about him.

* “Good day, everybody!”

No one gave any reply.

“Vous êtes le bourgeois?” * the officer asked Gerásim.

* “Are you the master here?”

Gerásim gazed at the officer with an alarmed and inquiring look.

“Quartier, quartier, logement!” said the officer, looking down at the little man with a condescending and good-natured smile. “Les français sont de bons enfants. Que diable! Voyons! Ne nous fâchons pas, mon vieux!” * added he, clapping the scared and silent Gerásim on the shoulder. “Well, does no one speak French in this establishment?” he asked again in French, looking around and meeting Pierre’s eyes. Pierre moved away from the door.

* “Quarters, quarters, lodgings! The French are good fellows. What the devil! There, don’t let us be cross, old fellow!”

Again the officer turned to Gerásim and asked him to show him the rooms in the house.

“Master, not here—don’t understand... me, you...” said Gerásim, trying to render his words more comprehensible by contorting them.

Still smiling, the French officer spread out his hands before Gerásim’s nose, intimating that he did not understand him either, and moved,

limping, to the door at which Pierre was standing. Pierre wished to go away and conceal himself, but at that moment he saw Makár Alexéevich appearing at the open kitchen door with the pistol in his hand. With a madman's cunning, Makár Alexéevich eyed the Frenchman, raised his pistol, and took aim.

"Board them!" yelled the tipsy man, trying to press the trigger. Hearing the yell the officer turned round, and at the same moment Pierre threw himself on the drunkard. Just when Pierre snatched at and struck up the pistol Makár Alexéevich at last got his fingers on the trigger, there was a deafening report, and all were enveloped in a cloud of smoke. The Frenchman turned pale and rushed to the door.

Forgetting his intention of concealing his knowledge of French, Pierre, snatching away the pistol and throwing it down, ran up to the officer and addressed him in French.

"You are not wounded?" he asked.

"I think not," answered the Frenchman, feeling himself over. "But I have had a lucky escape this time," he added, pointing to the damaged plaster of the wall. "Who is that man?" said he, looking sternly at Pierre.

"Oh, I am really in despair at what has occurred," said Pierre rapidly, quite forgetting the part he had intended to play. "He is an unfortunate madman who did not know what he was doing."

The officer went up to Makár Alexéevich and took him by the collar.

Makár Alexéevich was standing with parted lips, swaying, as if about to fall asleep, as he leaned against the wall.

"Brigand! You shall pay for this," said the Frenchman, letting go of him. "We French are merciful after victory, but we do not pardon traitors," he added, with a look of gloomy dignity and a fine energetic gesture.

Pierre continued, in French, to persuade the officer not to hold that drunken imbecile to account. The Frenchman listened in silence with the same gloomy expression, but suddenly turned to Pierre with a smile. For a few seconds he looked at him in silence. His handsome face assumed a melodramatically gentle expression and he held out his hand.

"You have saved my life. You are French," said he.

For a Frenchman that deduction was indubitable. Only a Frenchman could perform a great deed, and to save his life—the life of M. Ramballe, captain of the 13th Light Regiment—was undoubtedly a very great deed.

But however indubitable that conclusion and the officer's conviction based upon it, Pierre felt it necessary to disillusion him.

"I am Russian," he said quickly.

“Tut, tut, tut! Tell that to others,” said the officer, waving his finger before his nose and smiling. “You shall tell me all about that presently. I am delighted to meet a compatriot. Well, and what are we to do with this man?” he added, addressing himself to Pierre as to a brother.

Even if Pierre were not a Frenchman, having once received that loftiest of human appellations he could not renounce it, said the officer’s look and tone. In reply to his last question Pierre again explained who Makár Alexéevich was and how just before their arrival that drunken imbecile had seized the loaded pistol which they had not had time to recover from him, and begged the officer to let the deed go unpunished.

The Frenchman expanded his chest and made a majestic gesture with his arm.

“You have saved my life! You are French. You ask his pardon? I grant it you. Lead that man away!” said he quickly and energetically, and taking the arm of Pierre whom he had promoted to be a Frenchman for saving his life, he went with him into the room.

The soldiers in the yard, hearing the shot, came into the passage asking what had happened, and expressed their readiness to punish the culprits, but the officer sternly checked them.

“You will be called in when you are wanted,” he said.

The soldiers went out again, and the orderly, who had meanwhile had time to visit the kitchen, came up to his officer.

“Captain, there is soup and a leg of mutton in the kitchen,” said he. “Shall I serve them up?”

“Yes, and some wine,” answered the captain.