

CHAPTER I

In Petersburg at that time a complicated struggle was being carried on with greater heat than ever in the highest circles, between the parties of Rumyantsev, the French, Márya Fëdorovna, the Tsarévich, and others, drowned as usual by the buzzing of the court drones. But the calm, luxurious life of Petersburg, concerned only about phantoms and reflections of real life, went on in its old way and made it hard, except by a great effort, to realize the danger and the difficult position of the Russian people. There were the same receptions and balls, the same French theater, the same court interests and service interests and intrigues as usual. Only in the very highest circles were attempts made to keep in mind the difficulties of the actual position. Stories were whispered of how differently the two Empresses behaved in these difficult circumstances. The Empress Márya, concerned for the welfare of the charitable and educational institutions under her patronage, had given directions that they should all be removed to Kazán, and the things belonging to these institutions had already been packed up. The Empress Elisabeth, however, when asked what instructions she would be pleased to give—with her characteristic Russian patriotism had replied that she could give no directions about state institutions for that was the affair of the sovereign, but as far as she personally was concerned she would be the last to quit Petersburg.

At Anna Pávlovna's on the twenty-sixth of August, the very day of the battle of Borodinó, there was a soiree, the chief feature of which was to be the reading of a letter from His Lordship the Bishop when sending the Emperor an icon of the Venerable Sergius. It was regarded as a model of ecclesiastical, patriotic eloquence. Prince Vasíli himself, famed for his elocution, was to read it. (He used to read at the Empress'.) The art of his reading was supposed to lie in rolling out the words, quite independently of their meaning, in a loud and singsong voice alternating between a despairing wail and a tender murmur, so that the wail fell quite at random on one word and the murmur on another. This reading, as was always the case at Anna Pávlovna's soirees, had a political significance. That evening she expected several important personages who had to be made ashamed of their visits to the French theater and aroused to a patriotic temper. A good many people had already arrived, but Anna Pávlovna, not yet seeing all those whom she wanted in her drawing room, did not let the reading begin but wound up the springs of a general conversation.

The news of the day in Petersburg was the illness of Countess Bezúkhova. She had fallen ill unexpectedly a few days previously, had missed several gatherings of which she was usually the ornament, and was said to be receiving no one, and instead of the celebrated Petersburg doctors who usually attended her had entrusted herself to some Italian doctor who was treating her in some new and unusual way.

They all knew very well that the enchanting countess' illness arose from an inconvenience resulting from marrying two husbands at the same time, and that the Italian's cure consisted in removing such inconvenience; but in Anna Pávlovna's presence no one dared to think of this or even

appear to know it.

“They say the poor countess is very ill. The doctor says it is angina pectoris.”

“Angina? Oh, that’s a terrible illness!”

“They say that the rivals are reconciled, thanks to the angina...” and the word angina was repeated with great satisfaction.

“The count is pathetic, they say. He cried like a child when the doctor told him the case was dangerous.”

“Oh, it would be a terrible loss, she is an enchanting woman.”

“You are speaking of the poor countess?” said Anna Pávlovna, coming up just then. “I sent to ask for news, and hear that she is a little better. Oh, she is certainly the most charming woman in the world,” she went on, with a smile at her own enthusiasm. “We belong to different camps, but that does not prevent my esteeming her as she deserves. She is very unfortunate!” added Anna Pávlovna.

Supposing that by these words Anna Pávlovna was somewhat lifting the veil from the secret of the countess’ malady, an unwary young man ventured to express surprise that well-known doctors had not been called in and that the countess was being attended by a charlatan who might employ dangerous remedies.

“Your information may be better than mine,” Anna Pávlovna suddenly and venomously retorted on the inexperienced young man, “but I know on good authority that this doctor is a very learned and able man. He is private physician to the Queen of Spain.”

And having thus demolished the young man, Anna Pávlovna turned to another group where Bilíbin was talking about the Austrians: having wrinkled up his face he was evidently preparing to smooth it out again and utter one of his mots.

“I think it is delightful,” he said, referring to a diplomatic note that had been sent to Vienna with some Austrian banners captured from the French by Wittgenstein, “the hero of Petropol” as he was then called in Petersburg.

“What? What’s that?” asked Anna Pávlovna, securing silence for the mot, which she had heard before.

And Bilíbin repeated the actual words of the diplomatic dispatch, which he had himself composed.

“The Emperor returns these Austrian banners,” said Bilíbin, “friendly banners gone astray and found on a wrong path,” and his brow became smooth again.

“Charming, charming!” observed Prince Vasíli.

“The path to Warsaw, perhaps,” Prince Hippolyte remarked loudly and unexpectedly. Everybody looked at him, understanding what he meant. Prince Hippolyte himself glanced around with amused surprise. He knew no more than the others what his words meant. During his diplomatic career he had more than once noticed that such utterances were received as very witty, and at every opportunity he uttered in that way the first words that entered his head. “It may turn out very well,” he thought, “but if not, they’ll know how to arrange matters.” And really, during the awkward silence that ensued, that insufficiently patriotic person entered whom Anna Pávlovna had been waiting for and wished to convert, and she, smiling and shaking a finger at Hippolyte, invited Prince Vasíli to the table and bringing him two candles and the manuscript begged him to begin. Everyone became silent.

“Most Gracious Sovereign and Emperor!” Prince Vasíli sternly declaimed, looking round at his audience as if to inquire whether anyone had anything to say to the contrary. But no one said anything. “Moscow, our ancient capital, the New Jerusalem, receives her Christ”—he placed a sudden emphasis on the word her—“as a mother receives her zealous sons into her arms, and through the gathering mists, foreseeing the brilliant glory of thy rule, sings in exultation, ‘Hosanna, blessed is he that cometh!’”

Prince Vasíli pronounced these last words in a tearful voice.

Bilíbin attentively examined his nails, and many of those present appeared intimidated, as if asking in what they were to blame. Anna Pávlovna whispered the next words in advance, like an old woman muttering the prayer at Communion: “Let the bold and insolent Goliath...” she whispered.

Prince Vasíli continued.

“Let the bold and insolent Goliath from the borders of France encompass the realms of Russia with death-bearing terrors; humble Faith, the sling of the Russian David, shall suddenly smite his head in his bloodthirsty pride. This icon of the Venerable Sergius, the servant of God and zealous champion of old of our country’s weal, is offered to Your Imperial Majesty. I grieve that my waning strength prevents rejoicing in the sight of your most gracious presence. I raise fervent prayers to Heaven that the Almighty may exalt the race of the just, and mercifully fulfill the desires of Your Majesty.”

“What force! What a style!” was uttered in approval both of reader and of author.

Animated by that address Anna Pávlovna’s guests talked for a long time of the state of the fatherland and offered various conjectures as to the result of the battle to be fought in a few days.

“You will see,” said Anna Pávlovna, “that tomorrow, on the Emperor’s birthday, we shall receive news. I have a favorable presentiment!”