

## CHAPTER V

Nicholas sat leaning slightly forward in an armchair, bending closely over the blonde lady and paying her mythological compliments with a smile that never left his face. Jauntily shifting the position of his legs in their tight riding breeches, diffusing an odor of perfume, and admiring his partner, himself, and the fine outlines of his legs in their well-fitting Hessian boots, Nicholas told the blonde lady that he wished to run away with a certain lady here in Vorónezh.

“Which lady?”

“A charming lady, a divine one. Her eyes” (Nicholas looked at his partner) “are blue, her mouth coral and ivory; her figure” (he glanced at her shoulders) “like Diana’s....”

The husband came up and sullenly asked his wife what she was talking about.

“Ah, Nikíta Iványch!” cried Nicholas, rising politely, and as if wishing Nikíta Iványch to share his joke, he began to tell him of his intention to elope with a blonde lady.

The husband smiled gloomily, the wife gaily. The governor’s good-natured wife came up with a look of disapproval.

“Anna Ignátyevna wants to see you, Nicholas,” said she, pronouncing the name so that Nicholas at once understood that Anna Ignátyevna was a very important person. “Come, Nicholas! You know you let me call you so?”

“Oh, yes, Aunt. Who is she?”

“Anna Ignátyevna Malvínseva. She has heard from her niece how you rescued her.... Can you guess?”

“I rescued such a lot of them!” said Nicholas.

“Her niece, Princess Bolkónskaya. She is here in Vorónezh with her aunt. Oho! How you blush. Why, are...?”

“Not a bit! Please don’t, Aunt!”

“Very well, very well!... Oh, what a fellow you are!”

The governor’s wife led him up to a tall and very stout old lady with a blue headdress, who had just finished her game of cards with the most important personages of the town. This was Malvínseva, Princess Mary’s aunt on her mother’s side, a rich, childless widow who always lived in Vorónezh. When Rostóv approached her she was standing settling up for the game. She looked at him and, screwing up her eyes sternly, continued to upbraid the general who had won from her.

“Very pleased, mon cher,” she then said, holding out her hand to

Nicholas. "Pray come and see me."

After a few words about Princess Mary and her late father, whom Malvintseva had evidently not liked, and having asked what Nicholas knew of Prince Andrew, who also was evidently no favorite of hers, the important old lady dismissed Nicholas after repeating her invitation to come to see her.

Nicholas promised to come and blushed again as he bowed. At the mention of Princess Mary he experienced a feeling of shyness and even of fear, which he himself did not understand.

When he had parted from Malvintseva Nicholas wished to return to the dancing, but the governor's little wife placed her plump hand on his sleeve and, saying that she wanted to have a talk with him, led him to her sitting room, from which those who were there immediately withdrew so as not to be in her way.

"Do you know, dear boy," began the governor's wife with a serious expression on her kind little face, "that really would be the match for you: would you like me to arrange it?"

"Whom do you mean, Aunt?" asked Nicholas.

"I will make a match for you with the princess. Catherine Petróvna speaks of Lily, but I say, no—the princess! Do you want me to do it? I am sure your mother will be grateful to me. What a charming girl she is, really! And she is not at all so plain, either."

"Not at all," replied Nicholas as if offended at the idea. "As befits a soldier, Aunt, I don't force myself on anyone or refuse anything," he said before he had time to consider what he was saying.

"Well then, remember, this is not a joke!"

"Of course not!"

"Yes, yes," the governor's wife said as if talking to herself. "But, my dear boy, among other things you are too attentive to the other, the blonde. One is sorry for the husband, really...."

"Oh no, we are good friends with him," said Nicholas in the simplicity of his heart; it did not enter his head that a pastime so pleasant to himself might not be pleasant to someone else.

"But what nonsense I have been saying to the governor's wife!" thought Nicholas suddenly at supper. "She will really begin to arrange a match... and Sónya...?" And on taking leave of the governor's wife, when she again smilingly said to him, "Well then, remember!" he drew her aside.

"But see here, to tell the truth, Aunt..."

"What is it, my dear? Come, let's sit down here," said she.

Nicholas suddenly felt a desire and need to tell his most intimate thoughts (which he would not have told to his mother, his sister, or his friend) to this woman who was almost a stranger. When he afterwards recalled that impulse to unsolicited and inexplicable frankness which had very important results for him, it seemed to him—as it seems to everyone in such cases—that it was merely some silly whim that seized him: yet that burst of frankness, together with other trifling events, had immense consequences for him and for all his family.

“You see, Aunt, Mamma has long wanted me to marry an heiress, but the very idea of marrying for money is repugnant to me.”

“Oh yes, I understand,” said the governor’s wife.

“But Princess Bolkónskaya—that’s another matter. I will tell you the truth. In the first place I like her very much, I feel drawn to her; and then, after I met her under such circumstances—so strangely, the idea often occurred to me: ‘This is fate.’ Especially if you remember that Mamma had long been thinking of it; but I had never happened to meet her before, somehow it had always happened that we did not meet. And as long as my sister Natásha was engaged to her brother it was of course out of the question for me to think of marrying her. And it must needs happen that I should meet her just when Natásha’s engagement had been broken off... and then everything... So you see... I never told this to anyone and never will, only to you.”

The governor’s wife pressed his elbow gratefully.

“You know Sónya, my cousin? I love her, and promised to marry her, and will do so.... So you see there can be no question about—” said Nicholas incoherently and blushing.

“My dear boy, what a way to look at it! You know Sónya has nothing and you yourself say your Papa’s affairs are in a very bad way. And what about your mother? It would kill her, that’s one thing. And what sort of life would it be for Sónya—if she’s a girl with a heart? Your mother in despair, and you all ruined.... No, my dear, you and Sónya ought to understand that.”

Nicholas remained silent. It comforted him to hear these arguments.

“All the same, Aunt, it is impossible,” he rejoined with a sigh, after a short pause. “Besides, would the princess have me? And besides, she is now in mourning. How can one think of it!”

“But you don’t suppose I’m going to get you married at once? There is always a right way of doing things,” replied the governor’s wife.

“What a matchmaker you are, Aunt...” said Nicholas, kissing her plump little hand.