CHAPTER XIII

When Pierre and his wife entered the drawing room the countess was in one of her customary states in which she needed the mental exertion of playing patience, and so—though by force of habit she greeted him with the words she always used when Pierre or her son returned after an absence: “High time, my dear, high time! We were all weary of waiting for you. Well, thank God!” and received her presents with another customary remark: “It’s not the gift that’s precious, my dear, but that you give it to me, an old woman...”—yet it was evident that she was not pleased by Pierre’s arrival at that moment when it diverted her attention from the unfinished game.

She finished her game of patience and only then examined the presents. They consisted of a box for cards, of splendid workmanship, a bright-blue Sèvres tea cup with shepherdesses depicted on it and with a lid, and a gold snuffbox with the count’s portrait on the lid which Pierre had had done by a miniaturist in Petersburg. The countess had long wished for such a box, but as she did not want to cry just then she glanced indifferently at the portrait and gave her attention chiefly to the box for cards.

“Thank you, my dear, you have cheered me up,” said she as she always did. “But best of all you have brought yourself back—for I never saw anything like it, you ought to give your wife a scolding! What are we to do with her? She is like a mad woman when you are away. Doesn’t see anything, doesn’t remember anything,” she went on, repeating her usual phrases. “Look, Anna Timoféevna,” she added to her companion, “see what a box for cards my son has brought us!”

Belóva admired the presents and was delighted with her dress material.

Though Pierre, Natásha, Nicholas, Countess Mary, and Denísov had much to talk about that they could not discuss before the old countess—not that anything was hidden from her, but because she had dropped so far behindhand in many things that had they begun to converse in her presence they would have had to answer inopportune questions and to repeat what they had already told her many times: that so-and-so was dead and so-and-so was married, which she would again be unable to remember—yet they sat at tea round the samovar in the drawing room from habit, and Pierre answered the countess’ questions as to whether Prince Vasíli had aged and whether Countess Mary Alexéevna had sent greetings and still thought of them, and other matters that interested no one and to which she herself was indifferent.

Conversation of this kind, interesting to no one yet unavoidable, continued all through teatime. All the grown-up members of the family were assembled near the round tea table at which Sónya presided beside the samovar. The children with their tutors and governesses had had tea and their voices were audible from the next room. At tea all sat in their accustomed places: Nicholas beside the stove at a small table where his tea was handed to him; Mílka, the old gray borzoi bitch (daughter of the first Mílka), with a quite gray face and large black

eyes that seemed more prominent than ever, lay on the armchair beside him; Denísov, whose curly hair, mustache, and whiskers had turned half gray, sat beside countess Mary with his general's tunic unbuttoned; Pierre sat between his wife and the old countess. He spoke of what he knew might interest the old lady and that she could understand. He told her of external social events and of the people who had formed the circle of her contemporaries and had once been a real, living, and distinct group, but who were now for the most part scattered about the world and like herself were garnering the last ears of the harvests they had sown in earlier years. But to the old countess those contemporaries of hers seemed to be the only serious and real society. Natásha saw by Pierre's animation that his visit had been interesting and that he had much to tell them but dare not say it before the old countess. Denísov, not being a member of the family, did not understand Pierre's caution and being, as a malcontent, much interested in what was occurring in Petersburg, kept urging Pierre to tell them about what had happened in the Semënovsk regiment, then about Arakchéev, and then about the Bible Society. Once or twice Pierre was carried away and began to speak of these things, but Nicholas and Natásha always brought him back to the health of Prince Iván and Countess Mary Alexéevna.

"Well, and all this idiocy—Gossner and Tatáwinova?" Denísov asked. "Is that weally still going on?"

"Going on?" Pierre exclaimed. "Why more than ever! The Bible Society is the whole government now!"

"What is that, mon cher ami?" asked the countess, who had finished her tea and evidently needed a pretext for being angry after her meal. "What are you saying about the government? I don't understand."

"Well, you know, Maman," Nicholas interposed, knowing how to translate things into his mother's language, "Prince Alexander Golítsyn has founded a society and in consequence has great influence, they say."

"Arakchéev and Golítsyn," incautiously remarked Pierre, "are now the whole government! And what a government! They see treason everywhere and are afraid of everything."

"Well, and how is Prince Alexander to blame? He is a most estimable man. I used to meet him at Mary Antónovna's," said the countess in an offended tone; and still more offended that they all remained silent, she went on: "Nowadays everyone finds fault. A Gospel Society! Well, and what harm is there in that?" and she rose (everybody else got up too) and with a severe expression sailed back to her table in the sitting room.

The melancholy silence that followed was broken by the sounds of the children's voices and laughter from the next room. Evidently some jolly excitement was going on there.

"Finished, finished!" little Natásha's gleeful yell rose above them all.

Pierre exchanged glances with Countess Mary and Nicholas (Natásha he

never lost sight of) and smiled happily.

“That’s delightful music!” said he.

“It means that Anna Makárovna has finished her stocking,” said Countess Mary.

“Oh, I’ll go and see,” said Pierre, jumping up. “You know,” he added, stopping at the door, “why I’m especially fond of that music? It is always the first thing that tells me all is well. When I was driving here today, the nearer I got to the house the more anxious I grew. As I entered the anteroom I heard Andrúsha’s peals of laughter and that meant that all was well.”

“I know! I know that feeling,” said Nicholas. “But I mustn’t go there—those stockings are to be a surprise for me.”

Pierre went to the children, and the shouting and laughter grew still louder.

“Come, Anna Makárovna,” Pierre’s voice was heard saying, “come here into the middle of the room and at the word of command, ‘One, two,’ and when I say ‘three’... You stand here, and you in my arms—well now! One, two!...” said Pierre, and a silence followed: “three!” and a rapturously breathless cry of children’s voices filled the room. “Two, two!” they shouted.

This meant two stockings, which by a secret process known only to herself Anna Makárovna used to knit at the same time on the same needles, and which, when they were ready, she always triumphantly drew, one out of the other, in the children’s presence.