

## CHAPTER XIV

Soon after this the children came in to say good night. They kissed everyone, the tutors and governesses made their bows, and they went out. Only young Nicholas and his tutor remained. Dessalles whispered to the boy to come downstairs.

“No, Monsieur Dessalles, I will ask my aunt to let me stay,” replied Nicholas Bolkónski also in a whisper.

“Ma tante, please let me stay,” said he, going up to his aunt.

His face expressed entreaty, agitation, and ecstasy. Countess Mary glanced at him and turned to Pierre.

“When you are here he can’t tear himself away,” she said.

“I will bring him to you directly, Monsieur Dessalles. Good night!” said Pierre, giving his hand to the Swiss tutor, and he turned to young Nicholas with a smile. “You and I haven’t seen anything of one another yet.... How like he is growing, Mary!” he added, addressing Countess Mary.

“Like my father?” asked the boy, flushing crimson and looking up at Pierre with bright, ecstatic eyes.

Pierre nodded, and went on with what he had been saying when the children had interrupted. Countess Mary sat down doing woolwork; Natásha did not take her eyes off her husband. Nicholas and Denísov rose, asked for their pipes, smoked, went to fetch more tea from Sónya—who sat weary but resolute at the samovar—and questioned Pierre. The curly-headed, delicate boy sat with shining eyes unnoticed in a corner, starting every now and then and muttering something to himself, and evidently experiencing a new and powerful emotion as he turned his curly head, with his thin neck exposed by his turn-down collar, toward the place where Pierre sat.

The conversation turned on the contemporary gossip about those in power, in which most people see the chief interest of home politics. Denísov, dissatisfied with the government on account of his own disappointments in the service, heard with pleasure of the things done in Petersburg which seemed to him stupid, and made forcible and sharp comments on what Pierre told them.

“One used to have to be a German—now one must dance with Tatáwinova and Madame Kwüdener, and wead Ecka’tshausen and the bwethwen. Oh, they should let that fine fellow Bonaparte loose—he’d knock all this nonsense out of them! Fancy giving the command of the Semënov wegiment to a fellow like that Schwa’tz!” he cried.

Nicholas, though free from Denísov’s readiness to find fault with everything, also thought that discussion of the government was a very serious and weighty matter, and the fact that A had been appointed

Minister of This and B Governor General of That, and that the Emperor had said so-and-so and this minister so-and-so, seemed to him very important. And so he thought it necessary to take an interest in these things and to question Pierre. The questions put by these two kept the conversation from changing its ordinary character of gossip about the higher government circles.

But Natásha, knowing all her husband's ways and ideas, saw that he had long been wishing but had been unable to divert the conversation to another channel and express his own deeply felt idea for the sake of which he had gone to Petersburg to consult with his new friend Prince Theodore, and she helped him by asking how his affairs with Prince Theodore had gone.

"What was it about?" asked Nicholas.

"Always the same thing," said Pierre, looking round at his listeners. "Everybody sees that things are going so badly that they cannot be allowed to go on so and that it is the duty of all decent men to counteract it as far as they can."

"What can decent men do?" Nicholas inquired, frowning slightly. "What can be done?"

"Why, this..."

"Come into my study," said Nicholas.

Natásha, who had long expected to be fetched to nurse her baby, now heard the nurse calling her and went to the nursery. Countess Mary followed her. The men went into the study and little Nicholas Bolκόnski followed them unnoticed by his uncle and sat down at the writing table in a shady corner by the window.

"Well, what would you do?" asked Denísov.

"Always some fantastic schemes," said Nicholas.

"Why this," began Pierre, not sitting down but pacing the room, sometimes stopping short, gesticulating, and lisping: "the position in Petersburg is this: the Emperor does not look into anything. He has abandoned himself altogether to this mysticism" (Pierre could not tolerate mysticism in anyone now). "He seeks only for peace, and only these people sans foi ni loi \* can give it him—people who recklessly hack at and strangle everything—Magnítski, Arakchéev, and tutti quanti.... You will agree that if you did not look after your estates yourself but only wanted a quiet life, the harsher your steward was the more readily your object might be attained," he said to Nicholas.

\* Without faith or law.

"Well, what does that lead up to?" said Nicholas.

"Well, everything is going to ruin! Robbery in the law courts, in the

army nothing but flogging, drilling, and Military Settlements; the people are tortured, enlightenment is suppressed. All that is young and honest is crushed! Everyone sees that this cannot go on. Everything is strained to such a degree that it will certainly break,” said Pierre (as those who examine the actions of any government have always said since governments began). “I told them just one thing in Petersburg.”

“Told whom?”

“Well, you know whom,” said Pierre, with a meaning glance from under his brows. “Prince Theodore and all those. To encourage culture and philanthropy is all very well of course. The aim is excellent but in the present circumstances something else is needed.”

At that moment Nicholas noticed the presence of his nephew. His face darkened and he went up to the boy.

“Why are you here?”

“Why? Let him be,” said Pierre, taking Nicholas by the arm and continuing. “That is not enough, I told them. Something else is needed. When you stand expecting the overstrained string to snap at any moment, when everyone is expecting the inevitable catastrophe, as many as possible must join hands as closely as they can to withstand the general calamity. Everything that is young and strong is being enticed away and depraved. One is lured by women, another by honors, a third by ambition or money, and they go over to that camp. No independent men, such as you or I, are left. What I say is widen the scope of our society, let the mot d’ordre be not virtue alone but independence and action as well!”

Nicholas, who had left his nephew, irritably pushed up an armchair, sat down in it, and listened to Pierre, coughing discontentedly and frowning more and more.

“But action with what aim?” he cried. “And what position will you adopt toward the government?”

“Why, the position of assistants. The society need not be secret if the government allows it. Not merely is it not hostile to government, but it is a society of true conservatives—a society of gentlemen in the full meaning of that word. It is only to prevent some Pugachëv or other from killing my children and yours, and Arakchéev from sending me off to some Military Settlement. We join hands only for the public welfare and the general safety.”

“Yes, but it’s a secret society and therefore a hostile and harmful one which can only cause harm.”

“Why? Did the Tugendbund which saved Europe” (they did not then venture to suggest that Russia had saved Europe) “do any harm? The Tugendbund is an alliance of virtue: it is love, mutual help... it is what Christ preached on the Cross.”

Natasha, who had come in during the conversation, looked joyfully at

her husband. It was not what he was saying that pleased her—that did not even interest her, for it seemed to her that was all extremely simple and that she had known it a long time (it seemed so to her because she knew that it sprang from Pierre’s whole soul), but it was his animated and enthusiastic appearance that made her glad.

The boy with the thin neck stretching out from the turn-down collar—whom everyone had forgotten—gazed at Pierre with even greater and more rapturous joy. Every word of Pierre’s burned into his heart, and with a nervous movement of his fingers he unconsciously broke the sealing wax and quill pens his hands came upon on his uncle’s table.

“It is not at all what you suppose; but that is what the German Tugendbund was, and what I am proposing.”

“No, my friend! The Tugendbund is all very well for the sausage eaters, but I don’t understand it and can’t even pronounce it,” interposed Denisov in a loud and resolute voice. “I agree that everything here is rotten and howlible, but the Tugendbund I don’t understand. If we’re not satisfied, let us have a bun of our own. That’s all right. Je suis vot’e homme!” \*

\* “I’m your man.”

Pierre smiled, Natásha began to laugh, but Nicholas knitted his brows still more and began proving to Pierre that there was no prospect of any great change and that all the danger he spoke of existed only in his imagination. Pierre maintained the contrary, and as his mental faculties were greater and more resourceful, Nicholas felt himself cornered. This made him still angrier, for he was fully convinced, not by reasoning but by something within him stronger than reason, of the justice of his opinion.

“I will tell you this,” he said, rising and trying with nervously twitching fingers to prop up his pipe in a corner, but finally abandoning the attempt. “I can’t prove it to you. You say that everything here is rotten and that an overthrow is coming: I don’t see it. But you also say that our oath of allegiance is a conditional matter, and to that I reply: ‘You are my best friend, as you know, but if you formed a secret society and began working against the government—be it what it may—I know it is my duty to obey the government. And if Arakchéev ordered me to lead a squadron against you and cut you down, I should not hesitate an instant, but should do it.’ And you may argue about that as you like!”

An awkward silence followed these words. Natásha was the first to speak, defending her husband and attacking her brother. Her defense was weak and inapt but she attained her object. The conversation was resumed, and no longer in the unpleasantly hostile tone of Nicholas’ last remark.

When they all got up to go in to supper, little Nicholas Bolkónski went up to Pierre, pale and with shining, radiant eyes.

“Uncle Pierre, you... no... If Papa were alive... would he agree with you?” he asked.

And Pierre suddenly realized what a special, independent, complex, and powerful process of thought and feeling must have been going on in this boy during that conversation, and remembering all he had said he regretted that the lad should have heard him. He had, however, to give him an answer.

“Yes, I think so,” he said reluctantly, and left the study.

The lad looked down and seemed now for the first time to notice what he had done to the things on the table. He flushed and went up to Nicholas.

“Uncle, forgive me, I did that... unintentionally,” he said, pointing to the broken sealing wax and pens.

Nicholas started angrily.

“All right, all right,” he said, throwing the bits under the table.

And evidently suppressing his vexation with difficulty, he turned away from the boy.

“You ought not to have been here at all,” he said.